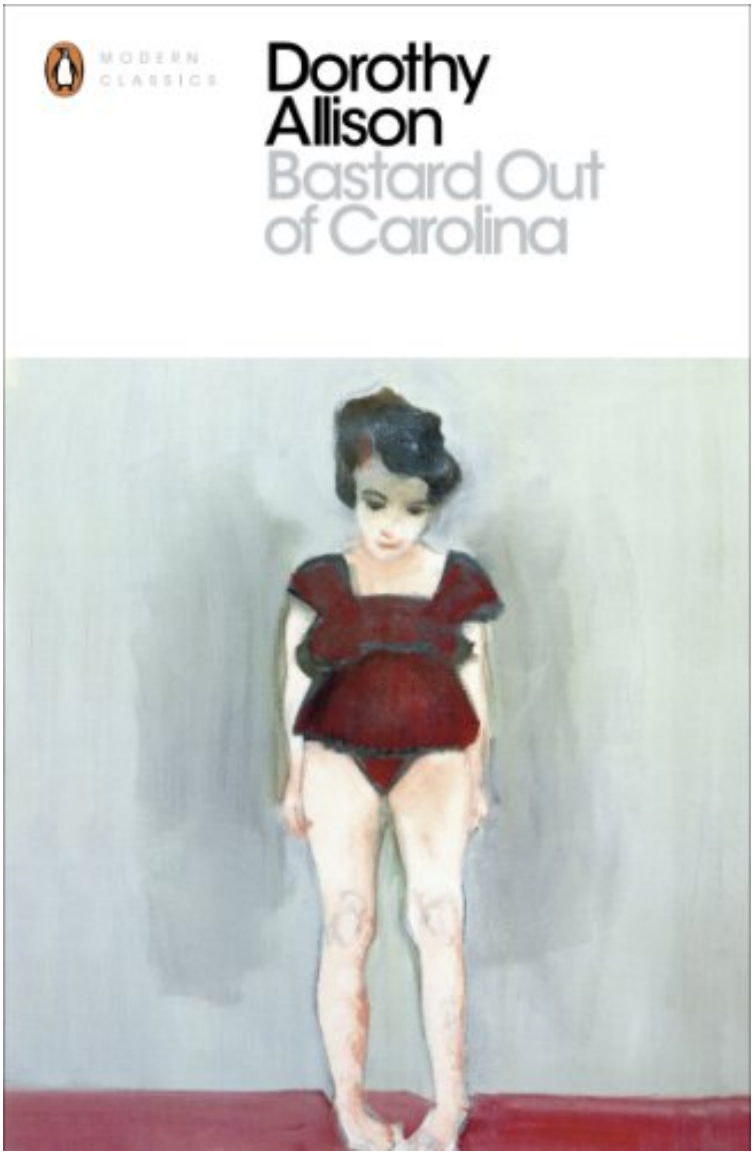
Bastard Out of Carolina



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Par Dorothy Allison : Bastard Out of Carolina before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Bastard Out of Carolina:

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurTwentieth Anniversary Edition - with a new introduction by the author'About as close to flawless as any reader could ask for' The New York Times Book Carolina in the 1950s, and Bone - christened Ruth Anna Boatwright - lives a happy life, in and out of her aunt's houses, playing with her cousins on the porch, sipping ice tea, loving her little sister Reece and her beautiful young mother. But Glen Waddell has been watching them all, wanting her mother too, and when he promises a new life for the family, her mother gratefully accepts. Soon Bone finds herself in a different, terrible world, living in fear, and an exile from everything she knows. Bastard Out of Carolina is a raw, poignant tale of fury, power, love and family.'For anyone who has ever felt the contempt of a self-righteous world, this book will resonate

within you like a gospel choir. For anyone who hasn't, this book will be an education' Barbara KingsolverDorothy Allison was awarded the 2007 Robert Penn Warren Award for Fiction, and has been likened to Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner and Harper Lee.Extrait1Ive been called Bone all my life, but my names Ruth Anne. I was named for and by my oldest auntAunt Ruth. My mama didnt have much to say about it, since strictly speaking, she wasnt there. Mama and a carful of my aunts and uncles had been going out to the airport to meet one of the cousins who was on his way back from playing soldier. Aunt Alma, Aunt Ruth, and her husband, Travis, were squeezed into the front, and Mama was stretched out in back, sound asleep. Mama hadnt adjusted to pregnant life very happily, and by the time she was eight months gone, she had a lot of trouble sleeping. She said that when she lay on her back it felt like I was crushing her, when she lay on her side it felt like I was climbing up her backbone, and there was no rest on her stomach at all. Her only comfort was the backseat of Uncle Traviss Chevy, which was jacked up so high that it easily cradled little kids or pregnant women. Moments after lying back into that seat, Mama had fallen into her first deep sleep in eight months. She slept so hard, even the accident didnt wake her up.My aunt Alma insists to this day that what happened was in no way Uncle Traviss 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. I cannot imagine that he hadnt been drinking. Theres no question in my mind but that they had all been drinking, except Mama, who never could drink, and certainly not when she was pregnant.No, Mama was just asleep and everyone else was drunk. And what they did was plow headlong into a slow-moving car. The front of Uncle Traviss Chevy accordioned; the back flew up; the aunts and Uncle Travis were squeezed so tight they just bounced a little; and Mama, still asleep with her hands curled under her chin, flew right over their heads, through the windshield, and over the car they hit. Going through the glass, she cut the top of her head, and when she hit the ground she bruised her backside, but other than that she wasnt hurt at all. Of course, she didnt wake up for three days, not till after Granny and Aunt Ruth had signed all the papers and picked out my name.I am Ruth for my aunt Ruth, and Anne for my mama. I got the nickname Bone shortly after Mama brought me home from the hospital and Uncle Earle announced that I was no bigger than a knucklebone and Aunt Ruths youngest girl, Deedee, pulled the blanket back to see the bone. Its lucky Im not Mattie Raylene like Granny wanted. But Mama had always promised to name her first daughter after her oldest sister, and Aunt Ruth thought Mamas child should just naturally carry Mamas name since they had come so close to losing her.Other than the name, they got just about everything else wrong. Neither Aunt Ruth nor Granny could write very clearly, and they hadnt bothered to discuss how Anne would be spelled, so it wound up spelled three different ways on the formAnn, Anne, and Anna. As for the name of the father, Granny refused to speak it after she had run him out of town for messing with her daughter, and Aunt Ruth had never been sure of his last name anyway. They tried to get away with just scribbling something down, but if the hospital didnt mind how a babys middle name was spelled, they were definite about having a fathers last name. So Granny gave one and Ruth gave another, the clerk got mad, and there I wascertified a bastard by the state of South Carolina.Mama always said it would never have happened if shed been awake. After all, she told my aunt Alma, they dont ask for a marriage license before they put you up on the table. She was convinced that she could have bluffed her way through it, said she was married firmly enough that no one would have questioned her.Its only when you bring it to their attention that they write it down.Granny said it didnt matter anyhow. Who cared what was written down? Did people read courthouse records? Did they ask to see your birth certificate before they sat themselves on your porch? Everybody who mattered knew, and she didnt give a rats ass about anybody else. She teased Mama about the damn silly paper with the red stamp on the bottom.What was it? You intended to frame that thing? You wanted something on your wall to prove you done it right? Granny could be mean where her pride was involved. The child is proof enough. Ant no stamp on her nobody can see.If Granny didnt care, Mama did. Mama hated to be called trash, hated the memory of every day shed ever spent bent over other peoples peanuts and strawberry plants while they stood tall and looked at her like she was a rock on the ground. The stamp on that birth certificate burned her like the stamp she knew theyd tried to put on her. No-good, lazy, shiftless. Shed work her hands to claws, her back to a shovel shape, her mouth to a bent and awkward smileanything to deny what Greenville County wanted to name her. Now a soft-talking black-eyed man had done it for themset a mark on her and hers. It was all she could do to pull herself up eight days after I was born and go back to work waiting tables with a tight mouth and swollen eyes.Mama waited a year. Four days before my first birthday and a month past her sixteenth, she wrapped me in a blanket and took me to the courthouse. The clerk was polite but bored. He had her fill out a form and pay a two-dollar fee. Mama filled it out in a

fine schoolgirls hand. She hadnt been to school in three years, but she wrote letters for everyone in the family and was proud of her graceful, slightly canted script.What happened to the other one? the clerk asked.Mama didnt look up from my head on her arm. It got torn across the bottom.The clerk looked at her more closely, turned a glance on me. Is that right?He went to the back and was gone a long time. Mama stood, quiet but stubborn, at the counter. When he came back, he passed her the paper and stayed to watch her face.It was the same, identical to the other one. Across the bottom in oversized red-inked block letters it read, ILLEGITIMATE.Mama drew breath like an old woman with pleurisy, and flushed pink from her neck to her hairline. I dont want it like this, she blurted.Well, little lady, he said in a long, slow drawl. Behind him she could see some of the women clerks standing in a doorway, their faces almost as flushed as her own but their eyes bright with an entirely different emotion. This is how its got to be. The facts have been established. He drew the word out even longer and louder so that it hung in the air between them like a neon reflection of my mamas blushestablished.The women in the doorway shook their heads and pursed their lips. One mouthed to the other, Some people.Mama made her back straighten, bundled me closer to her neck, and turned suddenly for the hall door. You forgetting your certificate, the man called after her, but she didnt stop. Her hands on my body clamped so tight I let out a high, thin wail. Mama just held on and let me scream.She waited another year before going back, that time taking my aunt Ruth with her and leaving me with Granny. I was there, Aunt Ruth promised them, and it was really my fault. In so much excitement I just got confused, what with Anney here looking like she was dead to the world and everybody shouting and running around. You know, there was a three-car accident brought in just minutes after us. Aunt Ruth gave the clerk a very sincere direct look, awkwardly trying to keep her eyes wide and friendly.You know how these things can happen.Oh, I do, he said, enjoying it all immensely.The form he brought out was no different from the others. The look he gave my mama and my aunt was pure righteous justification. Whatd you expect? he seemed to be saying. His face was set and almost gentle, but his eyes laughed at them. My aunt came close to swinging her purse at his head, but Mama caught her arm. That time she took the certificate copy with her.Might as well have something for my two dollars, she said. At seventeen, she was a lot older than she had been at sixteen. The next year she went alone, and the year after. That same year she met Lyle Parsons and started thinking more about marrying him than dragging down to the courthouse again. Uncle Earle teased her that if she lived with Lyle for seven years, she could get the same result without paying a courthouse lawyer. The law never done us no good. Might as well get on without it.Mama quit working as a waitress soon after marrying Lyle Parsons, though she wasnt so sure that was a good idea. Were gonna need things, she told him, but he wouldnt listen. Lyle was one of the sweetest boys the Parsonses ever produced, a soft-eyed, soft-spoken, too-pretty boy tired of being his mamas baby. Totally serious about providing well for his family and proving himself a man, he got Mama pregnant almost immediately and didnt want her to go out to work at all. But pumping gas and changing tires in his cousins Texaco station, he made barely enough to pay the rent. Mama tried working part-time in a grocery store but gave it up when she got so pregnant she couldnt lift boxes. It was easier to sit a stool on the line at the Stevens factory until Reese was born, but Lyle didnt like that at all.Hows that baby gonna grow my long legs if you always sitting bent over? he complained. He wanted to borrow money or take a second job, anything to keep his pretty new wife out of the mill. Honey girl, he called her, sweet thing.Dumpling, she called him back, sugar tit, and when no one could hear, manchild. She loved him like a baby, whispered to her sisters about the soft blond hairs on his belly, the way he slept with one leg thrown over her hip, the stories he told her about all the places he wanted to take her.He loves Bone, he really does, she told Aunt Ruth. Wants to adopt her when we get some money put by. She loved to take pictures of him. The best of them is one made at the gas station in the bright summer sun with Lyle swinging from the Texaco sign and wearing a jacket that proclaimed Greenville County Racetrack. Hed taken a job out at the track where they held the stock-car races, working in the pit changing tires at high speed and picking up a little cash in the demolition derby on Sunday afternoon. Mama didnt go out there with him much. She didnt like the noise or the stink, or the way the other men would tease Lyle into drinking warm beer to see if his work slowed down any. As much as she liked taking pictures, she only took one of him out at the track, with a tire hugged against his left hip, grease all over one side of his face, and a grin so wide you could smell the beer.It was a Sunday when Lyle died, not at the track but on the way home, so easily, so gently, that the peanut pickers who had seen the accident kept insisting that the boy could not be dead. Thered been one of those eerie summer showers where the sun never stopped shining and the rain came down in soft sheets that everybody ignored. Lyles truck had come around the curve from the train crossing at a clip. He waved at one of the pickers, giving his widest grin. Then the truck was spinning

off the highway in a rain-slicked patch of oil, and Lyle was bumped out the side door and onto the pavement.Thats a handsome boy, one of the pickers kept telling the highway patrolman. He wasnt doing nothing wrong, just coming along the road in the rainthat devils rain, you know. The sun was so bright, and that boy just grinned so. The old man wouldnt stop looking back over to where Lyle lay still on the edge of the road.Lyle lay uncovered for a good twenty minutes. Everybody kept expecting him to get up. There was not a mark on him, and his face was shining with that lazy smile. But the back of his head flattened into the gravel, and his palms lay open and damp in the spray of the traffic the patrolmen diverted around the wreck.Mama was holding Reese when the sheriffs car pulled up at Aunt Almas, and she must have known immediately what he had come to tell her, because she put her head back and howled like an old dog in labor, howled and rocked and squeezed her baby girl so tight Aunt Alma had to pinch her to get Reese free.Mama was nineteen, with two babies and three copies of my birth certificate in her dresser drawer. When she stopped howling, she stopped making any sound at all and would only nod at people when they tried to get her to cry or talk. She took both her girls to the funeral with all her sisters lined up alongside of her. The Parsonses barely spoke to her. Lyles mother told Aunt Alma that if her boy hadnt taken that damn job for Mamas sake, he wouldnt have died in the road. Mama paid no attention. Her blond hair looked dark and limp, her skin gray, and within those few days fine lines had appeared at the corners of her eyes. Aunt Ruth steered her away from the gravesite while Aunt Raylene tucked some of the flowers into her family Bible and stopped to tell Mrs. Parsons what a damn fool she was.Aunt Ruth was heavily pregnant with her eighth child, and it was hard for her not to take Mama into her arms like another baby. At Uncle Earles car, she stopped and leaned back against the front door, hanging on to Mama. She brushed Mamas hair back off her face, looking closely into her eyes. Nothing else will ever hit you this hard, she promised. She ran her thumbs under Mamas eyes, her fingers resting lightly on either temple. Now you look like a Boatwright, she said. Now you got the look. Youre as old as youre ever gonna get, girl. This is the way youll look till you die. Mama just nodded; it didnt matter to her anymore what she looked like.A year in the mill was all Mama could take after they buried Lyle; the dust in the air got to her too fast. After that there was no choice but to find work in a diner. The tips made all the difference, though she knew she could make more money at the honky-tonks or managing a slot as a cocktail waitress. There was always more money serving people beer and wine, more still in hard liquor, but shed have had to go outside Greenville County to do that, and she couldnt imagine moving away from her family. She needed her sisters help with her two girls.The White Horse Cafe was a good choice anyway, one of the few decent diners downtown. The work left her tired but not sick to death like the mill, and she liked the people she met there, the tips and the conversation.You got a way with a smile, the manager told her.Oh, my smile gets me a long way, she laughed, and no one would have known she didnt mean it. Truckers or judges, they all liked Mama. Aunt Ruth was right, her face had settled into itself. Her color had come back after a while, and the lines at the corners of her eyes just made her look ready to smile. When the men at the counter werent slipping quarters in her pocket they were bringing her things, souvenirs or friendship cards, once or twice a ring. Mama smiled, joked, slapped ass, and firmly passed back anything that looked like a down payment on something she didnt want to sell.Reese was two years old the next time Mama stopped in at the courthouse. The clerk looked pleased to see her again. She didnt talk to him this time, just picked up the paperwork and took it over to the new business offices near the Sears, Roebuck Auto Outlet. Uncle Earle had given her a share of his settlement from another car accident, and she wanted to use a piece of it to hire his lawyer for a few hours. The man took her money and then smiled at her much like the clerk when she told him what she wanted. Her face went hard, and he swallowed quick to keep from laughing. No sense making an enemy of Earle Boatwrights sister.Im sorry, he told her, handing half her money back. The way the law stands theres nothing I could do for you. If I was to put it through, it would come back just like the one you got now. You just wait a few years. Sooner or later theyll get rid of that damn ordinance. Mostly its not enforced anymore anyway.Then why, she asked him, do they insist on enforcing it on me?Now, honey, he sighed, clearly embarrassed. He wiggled in his seat and passed her the rest of her money across the desk. You dont need me to tell you the answer to that. Youve lived in this county all your life, and you know how things are. He gave a grin that had no humor in it at all. By now, they look forward to you coming in.Small-minded people, he told her, but that grin never left his face.Bastard! Mama hissed, and then caught herself. She hated that word.Family is family, but even love cant keep people from eating at each other. Mamas pride, Grannys resentment that there should even be anything to consider shameful, my aunts fear and bitter humor, my uncles hard-mouthed contempt for anything that could not be handled with a shotgun or a two-by-fourall combined to grow my mama up fast

and painfully. There was only one way to fight off the pity and hatefulness. Mama learned to laugh with them, before they could laugh at her, and to do it so well no one could be sure what she really thought or felt. She got a reputation for an easy smile and a sharp tongue, and using one to balance the other, she seemed friendly but distant. No one knew that she cried in the night for Lyle and her lost happiness, that under that biscuit-crust exterior she was all butter grief and hunger, that more than anything else in the world she wanted someone strong to love her like she loved her girls.Now, you got to watch yourself with my sister, Uncle Earle told Glen Waddell the day he took him over to the diner for lunch. Say the wrong thing and shell take the shine off your teeth.It was a Thursday, and the diner was serving chicken-fried steak and collard greens, which was Earles excuse for dragging his new workmate halfway across Greenville in the middle of a work day. Hed taken a kind of shine to Glen, though moment to moment he could not tell what that short stubborn boy was thinking behind those dark blue eyes. The Waddells owned the dairy, and the oldest Waddell son was running for district attorney. Skinny, nervous little Glen Waddell didnt seem like he would amount to much, driving a truck for the furnace works, and shaking a little every time he tried to look a man in the eye. But at seventeen, maybe it was enough that Glen tried, Earle told himself, and kept repeating stories about his sister to get the boy to relax.Anney makes the best gravy in the county, the sweetest biscuits, and puts just enough vinegar in those greens. Know what I mean?Glen nodded, though the truth was hed never had much of a taste for greens, and his well-educated mama had always told him that gravy was bad for the heart. So he was not ready for the moment when Mama pushed her short blond hair back and set that big hot plate of food down in front of his open hands. Glen took a bite of gristly meat and gravy, and it melted between his teeth. The greens were salt-sweet and fat-rich. His tongue sang to his throat; his neck went loose, and his hair fell across his face. It was like sex, that food, too good to waste on the middle of the day and a roomful of men too tired to taste. He chewed, swallowed, and began to come alive himself. He began to feel for the first time like one of the boys, a grown man accepted by the notorious and dangerous Black Earle Boatwright, staring across the counter at one of the prettiest women hed ever seen. His face went hot, and he took a big drink of ice tea to cool himself.Her? he stammered to Earle. That your sister? That pretty little white-headed thing? She ant no bigger than a girl.Earle grinned. The look on Glens face was as clear as the sky after spring rain. Oh, shes a girl, he agreed, and put his big hand on Glens shoulder. Shes my own sweet mamas baby girl. But you know our mamas a rattlesnake and our daddy was a son of a gun. He laughed loud, only stopping when he saw how Glen was watching Anney walk away, the bow of her apron riding high on her butt. For a moment he went hot-angry and then pulled himself back. The boy was a fool, but a boy. Probably no harm in him. Feeling generous and Christian, Earle gave a last hard squeeze to Glens shoulder and told him again, You watch yourself, son. Just watch yourself.Glen Waddell nodded, understanding completely the look on Earles face. The man was a Boatwright, after all, and he and his two brothers had all gone to jail for causing other men serious damage. Rumor told deadly stories about the Boatwright boys, the kind of tales men whispered over whiskey when women were not around. Earle was good with a hammer or a saw, and magical with a pickax. He drove a truck like he was making love to the gears and carried a seven-inch pigsticker in the side pocket of his reinforced painters pants. Earle Boatwright was everything Glen had ever wanted to bespecially since his older brothers laughed at him for his hot temper, bad memory, and general uselessness. Moreover, Earle had a gift for charming peoplemen or womenand he had charmed the black sheep of the Waddell family right out of his terror of the other men on the crew, charmed him as well out of his fear of his familys disapproval. When Earle turned that grin on him, Glen found himself grinning back, enjoying the notion of angering his daddy and outraging his brothers. It was something to work for, that relaxed and disarming grin of Earles. It made a person want to see it again, to feel Earles handclasp along with it and know a piece of Earles admiration. More than anything in the world, Glen Waddell wanted Earle Boatwright to like him. Never mind that pretty little girl, he told himself, and put his manners on hard until Earle settled back down. Glen yes-maamed all the waitresses and grabbed Earles check right out of Anneys hand, though it would take him down to quarters and cigarettes after he paid it.But when Earle went off to the bathroom, Glen let himself watch her again, that bow on her ass and the way her lips kept pulling back off her teeth when she smiled. Anney looked him once full in the face, and he saw right through her. She had grinned at her brother with an open face and bright sparkling eyes, an easy smile and a soft mouth, a face without fear or guile. The smile she gave Glen and everyone else at the counter was just as easy but not so open. Between her eyes was a fine line that deepened when her smile tightened. A shadow darkened her clear pupils in the moment before her glance moved away. It made her no less pretty but added an aura of sadness.You coming over tonight, Earle? she asked when he came back, in a

voice as buttery and sweet as the biscuits. The girls miss you bout as much as I do.Might be over, Earle drawled, if this kid here does his job right and we get through before dark this time. He slapped Glens shoulder lightly and winked at Anney. Maybe Ill even bring him with me.Yes, Glen thought, oh yes, but he kept quiet and took another drink of tea. The gravy in his stomach steadied him, but it was Anneys smile that cooled him down. He felt so strong he wanted to spit. He would have her, he told himself. He would marry Black Earles baby sister, marry the whole Boatwright legend, shame his daddy and shock his brothers. He would carry a knife in his pocket and kill any man who dared to touch her. Yes, he thought to himself, oh yes.Mama looked over at the boy standing by the cash register, with his dark blue eyes and bushy brown hair. Time was she would have blushed at the way he was watching her, but for that moment she just looked back into his eyes. Hed make a good daddy, she imagined, a steady man. He smiled and his smile was crooked. His eyes bored into her and got darker still. She flushed then, and smelled her own sweat, nervously unable to tell if it came from fear or lust.I need a husband, she thought, turned her back, and wiped her face. Yeah, and a car and a home and a hundred thousand dollars. She shook her head and waved Earle out the door, not looking again at the boy with him.Sister Anney, why dont you come over here and stand by my coffee cup, one of her regulars teased. Itll take heat just being next to your heart.Mama gave her careful laugh and pulled up the coffeepot. Ant got time to charm coffee when I can pour you a warm-up with one hand, she teased him back. Never mind no silly friends of Earles, she told herself, and filled coffee cups one at a time until she could get off the line and go take herself a break.Where you keep that paper, Ruth Annes birth certificate, huh? theyd tease Mama down at the diner.Under the sink with all the other trash, shed shoot back, giving them a glance so sharp theyd think twice before trying to tease her again.Put it away, Granny kept telling her. If you stopped thinking about it, people would too. As long as its something thatll get a rise out of you, peoplere gonna keep on using it.The preacher agreed. Your shame is between you and God, Sister Anne. No need to let it mark the child.My mama went as pale as the underside of an unpeeled cotton boll. I got no shame, she told him, and I dont need no man to tell me jackshit about my child.Jackshit, my aunt Ruth boasted. She said jackshit to the preacher. Ant nobody says nothing to my little sister, ant nobody can touch that girl or whats hers. You just better watch yourself around her.You better. You better. You just better watch yourself around her.Watch her in the diner, laughing, pouring coffee, palming tips, and frying eggs. Watch her push her hair back, tug her apron higher, refuse dates, pinches, suggestions. Watch her eyes and how they sink into her face, the lines that grow out from that tight stubborn mouth, the easy banter that rises from the deepest place inside her.Ant it about time you tried the courthouse again, Sister Anney?Ant it time you zipped your britches, Brother Calvin?Ant it time the Lord did something, rained fire and retribution on Greenville County? Ant there sin enough, grief enough, inch by inch of pain enough? Ant the measure made yet? Anney never said what she was thinking, but her mind was working all the time.Glen Waddell stayed on at the furnace works with Earle for one whole year, and drove all the way downtown for lunch at the diner almost every workday and even some Saturdays. Id like to see your little girls, he told Anney once every few weeks until she started to believe him. Got to be pretty little girls with such a beautiful mama. She stared at him, took his quarter tips, and admitted it. Yes, she had two beautiful little girls. Yes, he might as well come over, meet her girls, sit on her porch and talk a little. She wiped sweaty palms on her apron before she let him take her hand. His shoulders were tanned dark, and he looked bigger all over from the work he had been doing with Earle. The muscles bulging through his worn white T-shirt reminded her of Lyle, though he had none of Lyles sweet demeanor. His grip when he reached to take her arm was as firm as Earles, but his smile was his own, like no one elses she had ever known. She took a careful deep breath and let herself really smile back at him. Maybe, she kept telling herself, maybe hed make a good daddy.Mama was working grill at the White Horse Cafe the day the radio announced that the fire downtown had gone out of control, burning the courthouse and the hall of records to the ground. It was midway through the noon rush. Mama was holding a pot of coffee in one hand and two cups in the other. She put the cups down and passed the pot to her friend Mab.Im going home.You what?Ive got to go home.Wheres she going?Trouble at home.The cardboard box of wrinkled and stained papers was tucked under the sheets in the bottom of Aunt Almas chifforobe. Mama pulled out the ones she wanted, took them into the kitchen, and dropped them in the sink without bothering to unfold them. Shed just lit a kitchen match when the phone rang.You heard, I suppose. It was Aunt Ruth. Mab said you took off like someone set a fire under you.Not me, Mama replied. The only fire I got going here is the one burning up all these useless papers.Aunt Ruths laughter spilled out of the phone and all over the kitchen.Girl, there ant a woman in town going to believe you didnt set that fire yourself. Half the countys gonna tell the other how you burned down

that courthouse.Let them talk, Mama said, and blew at the sparks flying up. Talk wont send me to jail. The sheriff and half his deputies know I was at work all morning, cause I served them their coffee. I cant get into any trouble just cause Im glad the goddam courthouse burned down.She blew at the sparks again, whistling into the phone, and then laughed out loud. Halfway across town, Aunt Ruth balanced the phone against her neck, squeezed Grannys shoulder, and laughed with her. Over at the mill, Aunt Alma looked out a window at the smoke billowing up downtown and had to cover her mouth to keep from giggling like a girl. In the outer yard back of the furnace works, Uncle Earle and Glen Waddell were moving iron and listening to the radio. Both of them grinned and looked up at each other at the same moment, then burst out laughing. It was almost as if everyone could hear each other, all over Greenville, laughing as the courthouse burned to the ground.2Greenville, South Carolina, in 1955 was the most beautiful place in the world. Black walnut trees dropped their green-black fuzzy bulbs on Aunt Ruths matted lawn, past where their knotty roots rose up out of the ground like the elbows and knees of dirty children suntanned dark and covered with scars. Weeping willows marched across the yard, following every wandering stream and ditch, their long whiplike fronds making tents that sheltered sweet-smelling beds of clover. Over at the house Aunt Raylene rented near the river, all the trees had been cut back and the scuppernong vines torn out. The clover grew in long sweeps of tiny white and yellow flowers that hid slender red-and-black-striped caterpillars and fat gray-black slugsthe ones Uncle Earle swore would draw fish to a hook even in a thunderstorm. But at Aunt Almas, over near the Eustis Highway, the landlord had locked down the spigots so that the kids wouldnt cost him a fortune in water bills. Without the relief of a sprinkler or a hose the heat had burned up the grass, and the combined efforts of dogs and boys had reduced the narrow yard to a smoldering expanse of baked dirt and scattered rocks.Yards like a hot griddle, Aunt Alma complained. Catches all the heat of that tin roof and concentrates it. You could just about cook on that ground.Oh, its hot everywhere. Granny never agreed with Aunt Alma, and particularly not that summer when she was being paid a lot less than she wanted to watch Almas kids. And the little Mama threw in to pay her for keeping Reese and me didnt sweeten her attitude. Granny loved all her grandchildren, but she was always announcing that she didnt have much use for her daughters.My three boys worship me, shed tell everybody, but my girls, Lord! Ive got five girls and they never seem to appreciate me. Its how girls are, though, selfish and full of themselves. I shouldnt expect any better.Your granny means well, Mama told me before dropping us off to stay the day over at Aunt Almas, but dont pay too much attention to the things she says. Shes always loved her boy children more. Its just the way some women are. I nodded. I believed anything that Mama said was so.Almost the first thing I remember is Aunt Almas house and yard, back behind the tiny roadside store she and Uncle Wade were trying to manage. It was the summer after Reese was born, which means I must have been about five years old, only slightly bigger than Little Earle, Almas youngest. But Little Earle was a fat toddler still chafing in rubber pants and grabbing at everything with his unfailingly sticky hands, while I was a solemn watchful child with long thin bones and a cloud of wild black hair. I looked down on Little Earle as a lesser creature and stayed well out of reach of his grubby fingers and pushed-out baby lips. That was the summer it was so hot the katydids failed to sing and everyone spent their evenings out on the porch with large glasses of ice tea and damp hand towels to cool the back of the neck. Alma wouldnt even start cooking until after the sun had gone down. Twilight came on early, though, a long-drawn-out dimming of the heat and glare that made everything soft and magical, brought out the first fireflies, and added a cool enchantment to the metallic echoes of the slide guitar playing on Almas kitchen radio. Granny would plant herself in the porch rocker, leaving Almas girls to pick through snap beans, hope for a rainstorm, and tease her into telling stories.I always positioned myself behind Granny, up against the wall next to the screen door, where I could listen to Kitty Wells and George Jones, the whine of that guitar and what talk there was in the kitchen, as well as the sound of Aunt Almas twin boys thumping their feet against the porch steps and the girls giggles as their fingers slipped through the cool, dusty beans. There I was pretty much safe from Little Earle as he ran back and forth from Grannys apron pockets to the steps, where his brothers pitched pennies and practiced betting against each other. Little Earle would lope like a crippled crawfish, angling to the side, swaying unsteadily, and giggling his own wet croupy babble. The boys would laugh at him, Granny would just smile. Oblivious and happy, Little Earle would pound his fists on Greys shoulders and then twirl himself around to run all out toward Granny, Temple, and Patsy Ruth. Naked, dimpled all over, fat and brown and wide, his stubborn little body bulged with determination, and his little-boy prick bounced like a rubber toy between his bowlegged thighs as he whooped and ran, bumping his head on Grannys hip. He was like a windup toy spinning itself out, and his delight only increased when everyone started laughing at him as he jumped up again after falling plop on his

behind next to the tub of snap beans.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! Granny rocked forward and caught her hands under Little Earles arms, swinging him up off his feet and directly before her face. You dimple-belly, she called him, you little dimple-butt. She pressed her mouth against his midriff and blew fiercely so that her lips vibrated against Little Earles navela bubble-bubble roar that made him shriek and bounce and giggle a high-pitched wail of hysterical laughter. He drew his knees up and cupped his little hands around his sex, which only made Temple and Patsy Ruth laugh louder. Granny swung him back and forth a few times and then dropped him down on his feet. He took off immediately for the shelter of his older brothers armpit.Dimple-butt, Grey snorted, but pulled his little brother in tight to his side. Ant so ugly maybe. He rubbed his knuckles across Little Earles nearly bald head and sang out, You just tall, thats all. Grey laughed at that while Granny wiped her eyes and the girls poured cool water across the beans.I edged forward until I could put my hand on Grannys chair, fingers sliding over the smooth, worn trellis of woven slats to feel the heat of her body through her cotton dress. The laughter echoed around me, the music, truck brakes ground up on the highway, and somebody started shouting far off as the dark descended and the fireflies began to flicker past the boys heads. Granny put her arm down and squeezed my wrist. She leaned over and spat a stream of brown snuff off the side of the porch. I heard the dull plopping sound it made as it landed in the dusty yard. I slipped under her shoulder, leaned across the side of the rocker, and put my face close to her breast. 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, youre a Boatwright all right, a Boatwright for sure.I laughed up into her neck. Granny was ugly herself, she said so often enough, though she didnt seem to care. Her wide face was seamed and spotted with freckles and long deep lines. Her hair was thin and gray and tied back with one of the little black strings that came off a snuff pouch. She smelled strongbitter and salt, sour and sweet, all at the same time. My sweat disappeared into her skirt, my arms wrapped around her waist, and I breathed her in like the steam off soup. I rocked myself against her, as happy and safe as Little Earle had felt with her teeth on his belly.You know, Bone, your mamas gonna be late, Temple told me. These hot nights, they take forever to clean up down at the diner, and old Glens gonna be there hanging over the counter and slowing her down. Hes pure crazy where your mamas concerned.I nodded solemnly, hanging on to Granny. The radio sounded louder, the boys started to fight. Everybody was busy, everybody was talking, but I was perfectly happy at Grannys side, waiting for Mama to come home late from the diner, take Reese and me back to the tiny duplex she had rented downtown. If the heat continued into the night Mama would put us out on the screened porch on a makeshift mattress of couch cushions and sheets. She would sit up by us out there, humming and smoking in the quiet dark, while the radio played so soft we couldnt make it out.The world that came in over the radio was wide and far away and didnt touch us at all. We lived on one porch or another all summer long, laughing at Little Earle, teasing the boys and picking over beans, listening to stories, or to the crickets beating out their own soft songs. When I think of that summersleeping over at one of my aunts houses as easily as at home, the smell of Mamas neck as she bent over to hug us in the dark, the sound of Little Earles giggle or Grannys spit thudding onto the dry ground, and that country music playing low everywhere, as much a part of the evening as crickets and moonlightI always feel safe again. No place has ever seemed so sweet and quiet, no place ever felt so much like home.I worshiped my unclesEarle, Beau, and Nevil. They were all big men with wide shoulders, broken teeth, and sunken features. They kept dogs trained for hunting and drove old trucks with metal toolboxes bolted to the reinforced wood sides. They worked in the mills or at the furnace repair business, or sometimes did roofing or construction work depending on how the industry was going. They tinkered with cars together on the weekends, standing around in the yard sipping whiskey and talking dirty, kicking at the greasy remains of engines they never finished rebuilding. Their eyes were narrow under sun-bleached eyebrows, and their hands were forever working a blade or a piece of wood, or oiling some little machine part or other.You hold a knife like this,

they told me. You work a screwdriver from your shoulder, swing a hammer from your hip, and spread your fingers when you want to hold something safe.Though half the county went in terror of them, my uncles were invariably gentle and affectionate with me and my cousins. Only when they were drunk or fighting with each other did they seem as dangerous as they were supposed to be. The knives they carried were bright, sharp, and fascinating, their toolboxes were massive, full of every imaginable metal implement. Even their wallets bulged with the unknown and the mysteriousoutdated ID cards from the air base construction crew, passes for the racetrack, receipts for car repairs and IOUs from card games, as well as little faded pictures of pretty women who were not their wives. My aunts treated my uncles like overgrown boysrambunctious teenagers whose antics were more to be joked about than worried overand they seemed to think of themselves that way too. They looked young, even Nevil, whod had his teeth knocked out, while the auntsRuth, Raylene, Alma, and even Mamaseemed old, worn-down, and slow, born to mother, nurse, and clean up after the men.Men could do anything, and everything they did, no matter how violent or mistaken, was viewed with humor and understanding. The sheriff would lock them up for shooting out each others windows, or racing their pickups down the railroad tracks, or punching out the bartender over at the Rhythm Ranch, and my aunts would shrug and make sure the children were all right at home. What men did was just what men did. Some days I would grind my teeth, wishing I had been born a boy.I begged my aunts for Earles and Beaus old denim work-shirts so I could wear them just the way they did when they worked on their trucks, with the front tucked in and the tail hanging out. Beau laughed at me affectionately as I mimicked him. Earle and Nevil raked their calloused fingers through my black hair and played at catching my shirttail as I ran past them, but their hands never hurt me and their pride in me was as bright as the coals on the cigarettes they always held loosely between their fingers. I followed them around and stole things from them that they didnt really care aboutold tools, pieces of chain, and broken engine parts. I wanted most of all a knife like the ones they all carrieda Buck knife with a brass-and-stained-wood handle or a jackknife decorated with mother-of-pearl. I found a broken jackknife with a shattered handle that I taped back together around the bent steel tang. I carried that knife all the time until my cousin Grey took pity and gave me a better one.Uncle Earle was my favorite of all my uncles. He was known as Black Earle for three counties around. Mama said he was called Black Earle for that black black hair that fell over his eyes in a great soft curl, but Aunt Raylene said it was for his black black heart. He was a good-looking man, soft-spoken and hardworking. He told Mama that all the girls loved him because he looked like Elvis Presley, only skinny and with muscles. In a way he did, but his face was etched with lines and sunburned a deep red-brown. The truth was he had none of Elvis Presleys baby-faced innocence; he had a devilish look and a body Aunt Alma swore was made for sex. He was a big man, long and lanky, with wide hands marked with scars. Earle looks like trouble coming in on greased skids, my uncle Beau laughed. All the aunts agreed, their cheeks wrinkling around indulgent smiles while their fingers trailed across Uncle Earles big shoulders as sweetly and tenderly as the threadlike feet of hummingbirds.Uncle Earle always seemed to have money in his pockets, some job he was just leaving and another one he was about to take up. His wife had left him around the time Lyle Parsons died, because of what she called his lying ways. He wouldnt stay away from women, and that made her mad. Teresa was Catholic and took her vows seriously, which Earle had expected, but he had never imagined she would leave him for messing around with girls he would never have married and didnt love. His anger and grief over losing her and his three daughters gave him an underlying bitterness that seemed to make him just that much more attractive.That Earles got the magic, Aunt Ruth told me. Man is just a magnet to women. Breaks their hearts and makes them like it. She shook her head and smiled at me. All these youngsters playing at being something, imagining they can drive women wild with their narrow little hips and sweet baby smiles, they never gonna have the gift Earle has, dont even know enough to recognize it for what it is. A sad wounded man who genuinely likes womenthats what Earle is, a hurt little boy with just enough meanness in him to keep a woman interested.She pushed my hair back off my face and ran her thumb over my eyebrows, smoothing down the fine black hairs. Your real daddy She paused, looked around, and started again. He had some of that too, just enough, anyway, to win your mama. He liked women too, and thats something I can say for him. A man who really likes women always has a touch of magic.There werent any pictures of my real daddy, and Mama wouldnt talk to me about himno more than she would about the rest of the family. It was Granny who told me what a pissant he was; told me he lived up near Blackburn with a wife and six children who didnt even know I existed; said he sold insurance to colored people out in the county and had never been in jail a day in his life. A sorry excuse for a man, she called him, making me feel kind of wretched until Aunt Alma swore he hadnt been that bad, just pissed everybody

off when he wouldnt come back and ask Grannys forgiveness after she ran him off.Eight days after you were born, Aunt Alma told me, he came around while Granny was over at the mill to settle some trouble with one of the boys. Anney wasnt sure she wanted to see him at all, but Raylene and I persuaded her to let him see you while she stayed in the back bedroom. That boy was scared shitless, holding you in hands stained dark green where hed been painting his daddys flatbed truck. You just looked at him with your black Indian eyes like he wasnt nothing but a servant, lifting you up for some air or something. Then you let loose and pissed a pailful all down his sleeves, the front of his shirt, and right down his pants halfway to his knees! You peed all over the son of a bitch!Aunt Alma hugged me up onto her lap. Her grin was so wide it made her nose seem small. She looked like shed been waiting to tell me this story since I was born, waiting to praise and thank me for this thing I didnt even know I had done.Its like you were putting out your mamas opinion, speaking up for her there on his lap. And that boy seemed to know just what it meant, with your baby piss stinking up his clothes for all to smell. He passed you right over to me like you were gonna go on to drown him if he didnt hurry. Took off without speaking to your mama and never came back again. When we heard hed married another little girl was already carrying his baby, Earle joked that the boy was just too fertile for his own good, that he couldnt plow a woman without making children, and maybe its true. With the six hes got legal, and you, and the others people say hes got scattered from Spartanburg to Greer, hes been a kind of one-man population movement. You got family you ant ever gonna know is your ownall of you with that dark dark hair he had himself. She grinned at me, reaching out to push my midnight-black hair back off my face.Oh, Bone! she laughed. Maybe you should plan on marrying yourself a blond just to be safe.
Huh?Granny wouldnt talk much about my real daddy except to curse his name, but she told me just about everything else. She would lean back in her chair and start reeling out story and memory, making no distinction between what she knew to be true and what she had only heard told. The tales she told me in her rough, drawling whisper were lilting songs, ballads of family, love, and disappointment. Everything seemed to come back to grief and blood, and everybody seemed legendary.My granddaddy, your great-great-granddaddy, he was a Cherokee, and he didnt much like us, all his towheaded grandchildren. Some said he had another family down to Eustis anyway, a proper Indian wife who gave him black-haired babies with blue eyes. Ha! Blue eyes ant that rare among the Cherokee around here. Me, I always thought it a shame we never turned up with them like his other babies. Of course, he was a black-eyed bastard himself, and maybe he never really made those other babies like they say. What was certain was my grandma never stepped out on him. Woman was just obsessed with that man, obsessed to the point of madness. Used to cry like a dog in the night when he was gone. He didnt stay round that much either, but every time he come home shed make another baby, another red-blond child with muddy brown eyes that hed treat like a puppydog or a kitten. Man never spanked a child in his life, never hit Grandma. Youd think he would have, he didnt seem to care all that much. Quiet man, too. Wouldnt fight, wouldnt barely talk. Not a Boatwright, thats for sure.But we loved him, you know, almost as much as Grandma. Would have killed to win his attention even one more minute than we got, and near died to be any way more like him, though we were as different from him as children can be. None of us quiet, all of us fighters. None of us got those blue eyes, and no one but you got that blue-black hair. Lord, you were a strange thing! You were like a fat red-faced doll with all that black black haira baby doll with a full head of hair. Just as quiet and sweet-natured as he used to be. You didnt even cry till you took croup at four months. Ive always thought hed have liked you, Granddaddy would. You even got a little of the shine of him. Those dark eyes and that hair when you was born, black as midnight. I was there to see.Oh, hell, Earle laughed when I repeated some of Grannys stories. Every third family in Greenville County swears its part of Cherokee Nation. Whether our great-granddaddy was or wasnt, it dont really make a tittys worth of difference. Youre a Boatwright, Bone, even if you are the strangest girl-child we got.I looked at him carefully, keeping my Cherokee eyes level and my face blank. I could not have said a word if Great-Great-Granddaddy had been standing there looking back at me with my own black eyes.Mama wore her hair cut short, curled, and bleached. Every other month she and Aunt Alma would get together and do each others hair, rinsing Aunt Almas in beer or lemon juice to lighten it just a little, trimming Mamas back and bleaching it that dark blond she liked. Then theyd set pin curls for each other, and while those dried they would coax Reese into sitting still long enough that her baby-fine red locks could be tied up in rags. I would tear up the rags, rinse pins, strain the juice through a cloth happily enough, but I refused the perm Mama was always insisting she wanted to give me.Stinks and hurts, I complained. Do it to Reese.Oh, Reese dont need it. Look at this. And Aunt Alma tugged a few of Reeses springy long curls free from the rags. Like soft corkscrews, the curls bounced and swung as if they were magical. This child has the best hair in the

world, just like yours, Anney, when you were a baby. Yours had a little red to it too, seems to me.From Publishers WeeklyAllison's remarkable country voice emerges in a first novel spiked with pungent characters ranging from the slatternly to the grotesque, and saturated with sense of place--Greenville, S.C. Ruth Anne Boatwright, 13, got the nickname Bone at birth, when she was tiny as a knucklebone, and the tag acquires painful derivatives, like "Bonehead." While her mother, Annie, a waitress, tries vainly to get the word "illegitimate" scrubbed from Bone's birth certificate, her tobacco-spitting granny reminds her she's a bastard. The identity of her real father, whom granny drove away, is kept from her. Surrounded by loving aunts and uncles, Bone still endures ridicule (she's homely, she has no voice for gospel singing) and--from vicious Daddy Glen, her mother's new husband--beatings and sexual abuse. Bone takes refuge in petty crime, like breaking into Woolworth's, and finds her truest friend in unmarried Aunt Raylene, who once had a great love for another woman. Annie gently defends Daddy Glen, blaming her daughter, until the tale's inevitably brutal climax. Mental and physical cruelty to women forms a main theme, illuminated by the subplot of pathetic albino Shannon Pearls, her story rife with Southern gothic overtones. Allison, author of the well-received short story collection Trash , doesn't condescend to her "white trash" characters; she portrays them with understanding and love.