



## **Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature**

*Dorothy Allison*

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Compelling collection of autobiographical narratives, essays, and performance pieces They don't write much better than this.

## **Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature Details**

Date : Published May 28th 2013 by Open Road Media (first published 1994)

ISBN :

Author : Dorothy Allison

Format : Kindle Edition 261 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Feminism, Writing, Essays, Glbt, Queer, Social Issues, Class, Lgbt



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# From Reader Review Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature for online ebook

y. says

having gone to an undergrad institution that prized itself on the humanities and majored in american literature and womens studies (much to the horror of my parents, who couldnt understand how those degrees would lead to an optometry career), i spent an insane amount of time between the ages of 18 - 21 talking about all the -isms and -obias that plague both this nation and the world. and yet there was a disquieting silence surrounding *class*, and to this i am not sure if this is because of the classes i chose to take, or because i just tuned out.

in any case, reading *skin: talking about sex, class and literature* was a monumental experience for me; when allison speaks of the mythical poor and of being an academic, i almost bristled with the tension that she was speaking of, since that tension is something that i have felt all of my life. to grow up working class, to aspire for academic satisfaction, and to be human, and not some kind of angel living in the streets, paired with the idea of literature as both salvation and damnation, no one id read to that point had articulated that existence so amazingly as allison has in this collection of essays.

her novels are not as strong as her non-fiction, sadly, but allison is someone i find deeply moving in her unaffected style and presentation.

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## Bib MontEnclus says

Lu en français chez Cambourakis

Quittons les histoires pour nous intéresser à un essai aujourd’hui, ou plutôt à une collection d’articles de l’auteur féministe et lesbienne Dorothy Allison. Dans cette vingtaine de textes tournant autour de la question de la classe sociale, de l’orientation sexuelle, du genre et de l’écriture, elle questionne son rapport au monde et le nôtre par la même occasion.

J’ai débuté cet essai sans grande conviction et j’ai été agréablement surprise par la facilité de lecture et l’attrait de la différence de ton des articles qui se succèdent mais ne se ressemblent pas. Alors que le féminisme est un mot qui fait encore peur à beaucoup de gens (j’avoue que je ne comprendrai jamais pourquoi), Dorothy Allison s’attèle à des questions difficiles dans cette problématique globale en la dépassant pour réfléchir aux rapports de classe, entre autres. Issue d’un milieu très pauvre, elle nous parle de la perception qu’elle a eu de sa légitimité dans notre société, de la manière dont les classes « supérieures » imposent leur vision du monde aux autres et de la dignité de manière générale. Comme elle nous le dit: « [...] je sais que souffrir ne rend pas noble. Cela détruit. » (p. 44). Mais surtout, Dorothy Allison nous amène à réfléchir et à percevoir différemment le monde en nous aidant à le comprendre tel qu’elle le voit elle-même.

<https://bibliothequemontdelenclus.wor...>

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## **Rachel Dows says**

Oy.

Smut.

Until the very end, then a touching, engaging short story.

Cut the smut, focus on the story - there is no need for a piece to be so graphic; sex doesn't say anything. Use the characters, not their bodies.

That's just my two cents, for what it's worth.

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## **Grace says**

Dorothy Allison published *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature* in 1994, only a couple of years after her amazing first novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*. I've read the novel probably three times, but for some reason it never occurred to me to look for further work by Allison. I guess I assumed that she, like Harper Lee, had probably given so much to write that amazing novel that she didn't have any writing left in her.

I was so wrong.

I got an inclination of this a couple of years ago when, on the recommendation of a friend, I picked up Allison's 1995 memoir, *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure*. Just as much as Allison's fiction, and in many of the same ways, her memoir was stunning, beautiful, mean, and hard to get through. I read it twice back-to-back. Then I didn't read anything else of Allison's.

Until this week, when, on a whim, I picked up *Skin* from the library. Collected and published a year before the memoir but spanning the decade or so before, the essays in *Skin* cover much of the same ground, but in a different way. In *Skin*, Allison reconciles her life and work as a feminist activist with both her radical sexuality (Allison is a lesbian who identifies herself as a "pervert" a "femme," and a masochist) and her Southern working class background. In the essays, she speaks passionately and honestly about two things most people can never be honest about: sex and money. She also talks a great deal about writing and what it means to her to be a writer as well as a working class Southern lesbian feminist.

*Skin* is one of the most searingly honest and brave books I've ever read (and it is in the company of Allison's other work in that category). Allison is insistent that you absorb her truth when you read her books, face it head on and deal with it, and I admire that about her. When she speaks of her family and the poverty and pain in which she grew up, she paints her relatives neither as martyred deserving poor nor as indolent trash, but as people in often desperate situations doing what they could. It's rarely pretty and often heart wrenching, but it is real, and because it's so real, it is easy to recognize oneself in Allison's stories.

The more surprising thing about *Skin*, though, is not Allison's discussion of her childhood and class background, which is ground she covers in *Bastard* and in *Two or Three Things*, but her discussion of her sexuality. She not only speaks candidly of her own sexual preferences and needs, but is also honest about how alienated she was and is from many feminist and lesbian circles due to the way she expresses her

sexuality. Allison is critical of "political lesbians" and of the way women repress their sexual desires in general. She writes not hesitantly but insistently about violent sex, sex toys, and pornography. She claims her sexuality, like her class, not as something at odds with her feminism, but integral to it. Reading it is a revelation.

Reading Skin took me from being a fan of Allison's work to being a convert to her brand of feminism. I plan to immediately read Trash, her first book of short stories (1988) and follow it with her most recent work, the novel Cavedweller (1998). Then I'll wait with baited breath for the release of her next novel. Reading Allison's work makes me not only want to live honestly, but to write honestly. I can't emphasize strongly enough what that's worth.

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### **Liza says**

#### I FUCKING LOVE DOROTHY ALLISON

I don't know how to express what this collection means to me. I don't know how to deal with how much I relate to Dorothy - there are significant differences in our experiences, but such overlap! I love how visceral and aggressive and BRAVE her writing is. It's pretty synchronistic me reading this now - I recently started a women's writing course and have been confronting the fact that I can currently only write about my past traumas, which is difficult but also since it's the only writing I can do and writing is a healing thing for me it's good as well. This validated me so much. I did a lot of underlining and drew a fair few hearts in the margins and wrote I FUCKING LOVE YOU DOROTHY after 'Skin, Where She Touches Me.' I am so grateful that this amazing strong woman has touched my life. I still want to read everything she's ever written, again and again and again. Writing like this makes my heart dance with how happy I am to be alive to read it.

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### **Gaëlle-Anne says**

Au début je me suis dit... cette traduction française ne rend probablement pas justice aux mots de l'autrice. Au début je me suis dit... ces histoires ne me ressemblent pas. Et puis... Ces mots comme des éclairs qui foudroient et illuminent. Et puis... Ces sensations et vécus qui prennent forme sur la page. Un livre merveilleux, pour les meufs qui aiment le cul avec les meufs, pour les personnes qui sont pauvres, pour les personnes qui ont été abusées, pour les personnes qui ne savent pas comment elles ont fait mais qui sont encore là, à rire aux étoiles, à aimer férolement. Ce bouquin brise le cœur et le soulage, selon le souhait de l'autrice. Merci, pour ces mots jamais prononcés, pour ces sentiments jamais reconnus, pour ces envies toujours invisibilisées.

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### **Wade says**

i love Dorothy Allison's writing style, and she's a mesmerizing public speaker. i literally couldn't speak when i met her -- i just kept blushing and mumbling. she smiled like she does and said, "you can tell your friends a lesbian flirted with you."

i had to get that out. okay, this book...i'm not the biggest fan of her more fictional stuff. i like Dorothy

Allison writing about life and writing and ideas. she makes connections and makes sense like few i've read. and the story called You, Me, and Him (i think) the one that starts with "frog fucking" is just about the best piece of writing i've ever read.

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### **Andrew Bishop says**

I would have to say that this is one of the best essay collections I've read. Certainly it stands out in this way among essay collections of lesbian non-fiction writing and radical, class-critical feminism. Allison accomplishes her usual muscular-femme honesty and bullshit-cutting style with a graceful method not unlike her famed novels and short fiction. Here, she addresses arenas of the political-through-the-personal in stories of her life experiences. Perhaps it is the autobiographical nature of her fiction style that makes it so powerful but, here, it is the stylistic nature of the essay format that captures me.

She addresses topics as varied as the gender dynamics of a child's sexuality raised on shooting guns; mitigating moments of pain and the impossibility of understanding between intimate partners; or the challenges of being an upwardly-bound lesbian artist with a rural working-class background moving into an urban working-class neighborhood with neighbors that enjoy 'traditional' sexuality.

Unlike the dry, if at times essential, tone and frame of much radical essay writing, Allison is unique in her contribution to a transgressive (post)feminist politics that easily welcomes and accesses an unforgiving battle cry for sexual freedom and transhuman diversity. The potential that she offers up to the palette of human complexity of emotion and intimate interpersonal communication was, for me, breathtaking at times. This collection is highly recommended for the reader who revels in works that challenge them to consider the diversity of conceptions of what it can mean to have relationships with other humans.

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### **Khal says**

Les essais parus dans la première édition française du titre (1999) souffrent beaucoup d'une traduction pauvre. Je recommande la lecture de la version originale pour apprécier pleinement la puissance de ces textes.

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### **Caitlin Constantine says**

First, don't do as I did and read this all at once. I did, and after a while, I was like, Okay, I get it, you went to a lot of meetings and built bookshelves at the women's center and like butch women who will dominate you. That kind of exasperation isn't really fair, because this is a collection of autobiographical essays written over Allison's career, and as anyone who has ever engaged in autobiographical writing knows, you are kind of limited in your material.

Aside from that I was struck by how emotional and powerful her writing is. I particularly liked her writing about her background as a poor Southern white lesbian, and how all of those aspects of her identity often clashed with each other and with the world around her. That she has finally been able to come to some sort of peace with herself and the world around her is so inspiring to me.

I also really enjoyed her writing on writing and literature. I am a sucker for that kind of writing, because as someone who is passionate about both things and has been her entire life, I really find myself having strong opinions and the ability to relate to others with strong opinions.

All in all, essential reading for anyone with any kind of passion for social justice and a love for humanity.

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### **Florence Benaddi says**

So so good. Made me realize of my gayness and love for gays. So smart also on how to write and the power of childhood

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### **Peggy Payne Paustenbach says**

A bit of a bumpy ride to read...but some wonderful writing about self perspective, poverty, sexuality, abuse, social class and long range conscious/unconscious internalizing of childhood impressions..specifically as an "other" and as a "less than". Was personally very helpful to me. A remarkable woman.

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### **Aaden Friday says**

A great collection of essays and stories. Moving, inspiring, confrontational, beautiful, argumentative, soothing, and raw.

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### **Larry Bassett says**

This is Ms. Allison's fourth book. She has been a five star writer for me so far having read two of her books. But, considering her other autobiographical writing, I am interested to see what the Non-fiction label means with *Skin*. There are 24 "essays, autobiographical narratives and performance pieces" in this book. That's what they are called on the back cover.

*Skin* was published in 1994. She was 45 at that time.

The author probes her experience of being a lifelong feminist activist, a controversial sex radical, and a Southern expatriate.

So, let's see what is in this book. I would like to think that Dorothy felt pretty good about her writing as this book came out. *Bastard Out of Carolina* had been published a couple of years earlier and was an immediate critical success. Just for starters, I can't help but like a woman who calls herself queer. So she knows she is a poor queer and that isn't part of the entitled mainstream. She had spent her entire life being the "they" rather than the "we".

When I was a young teenager, reading *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair made me want to try to change the

world. It seems quite possible that Dorothy Allison would be my Upton Sinclair of the 21st century. She can get me going and ready to face all foes.

Everything that Dorothy Allison writes tells us about her.

I had believed everything Bertha Harris had said about the process and importance of writing. But if everything was connected, and writing well required the kind of self-knowledge and naked revelation she implied, then writing was too dangerous for me. I could not go that naked in the world. I stopped writing for six months. When I started again, I did it knowing what was necessary. Maybe not for anyone else, but for me, the kind of person I am, writing meant an attempt to sneak up on the truth, to figure it out slowly through the characters on the page. If writing was dangerous, lying was deadly, and only through writing things out would I discover where my real fears were, my layered network of careful lies and secrets. Whether I published or not was unimportant. What mattered was the act of self-discovery, self-revelation. Who was I and what had happened to me? In the most curious way, I have only learned what I know through writing fiction. What I have been able to imagine has shaped what I know and revealed to me what I truly fear and desire.

She has given you – for free – a summary of how she approaches writing. Through her imagination she finds the truths of her life. Take the time to read the entire book; she has overcome her fear to write it. The greatest compliment that you can give this writer is to read her book.

Sex is a central issue of feminism for Ms. Allison. And silence is the best ally of those who want to keep the lesbian feminist community powerless. Sex is one of the arenas where she is most controversial even within the lesbian world. She believes that pornography is not the enemy and monogamy is not the ideal.

...the preachers, psychologists, and politicians who want us to be silent, frightened women they can control are not avoiding the issue of sex, the naming of deviants, the attacks on us as queers and perverts and immoral individuals. And it is as individuals that we are most vulnerable to them: individual lesbian mothers fighting for their children, individual lesbian teachers demanding their right to do the work they love, and individual lesbian citizens who want to live as freely and happily as their neighbors, whether they wear leather or all-cotton clothes, keep compost heaps or drive motorcycles, live with one woman for thirty years or treat sex as a sport and are always in pursuit of their personal best. All of us are vulnerable to individual attack. Sex is still the favorite subject of demagogues – they know how vulnerable we are.

She says it is her right to be obscene, to be irreverent, to be a loud dyke, to love and be loved as she wants, as she desires. Her goal is not to be politically correct but to be what she is. You do not need to read “The Theory and Practice of the Strap-on Dildo” but you should be able to if you want. The sex in this book is a little too graphic for me. But enlightening to someone who knows hardly anything about sex between consenting women.

Dorothy Allison is a working class lesbian who is determinedly not the same as a political or theoretical lesbian.

The theoretical lesbian was everywhere all through the eighties, and a lot of times I could have sworn she was straight. Speaking on college campuses, identifying myself as a feminist and a lesbian but not an anti-pornography activist, I kept running into young women who knew who

the lesbian was. The lesbian was the advanced feminist, the rare and special being endowed with social insight and political grace. I argued that there was a gap between their theory and my reality – that there were lots of lesbians who fucked around, read pornography, voted Republican (a few anyway), and didn't give a damn about the National Organization for Women. The lesbian you're talking about, I would try to explain, is the rage of all women, perhaps, but the lust of few. Real lesbians are not theoretical constructs. We have our own history, our own issues and agendas, and complicated sex lives, completely separate from heterosexuality, and just as embattled and difficult for straight society to accept as they ever were.

Allison devotes some fascinating words to her involvement and evolvement with the publishing industry including mainstream publishers and her struggle to finish writing *Bastard Out of Carolina*.

As I was finishing the copyediting of *Bastard*, I found myself thinking about all I had read when Kate Millett published *Flying* : her stated conviction that telling the truth was what feminist writers were supposed to do. The telling the truth – your side of it anyway, knowing that there were truths other than your own – was a moral act, a courageous act, an act of rebellion that would encourage other such acts. Like Kate Millett, I knew that what I wanted to do as a lesbian and a feminist writer was to remake the world into a place where the truth would be hallowed, not held in contempt, where silence would be impossible.

You might think that I might as well just quote the entire book! And, it is true, there is so much of it that deserves to be quoted. I guess that is one way I am making the recommendation that you read *Skin*. It says so much.

Allison finally comes through with the answer to 'fact or fiction?' It is probably the answer you have been expecting all along.

The fiction I write ... is never wholly fictive. I change things. I lie. I embroider, make over, and reuse the truth of my life, my family, lovers, and friends. Acknowledging this, I make no apologies, knowing that what I create is as crafted and deliberate as the work of any other poet, novelist, or short story writer. I choose what to tell and what to conceal. I design and calculate the impact I want to have. When I sit down to make my stories I know very well that I want to take the reader by the throat, break her heart, and heal it again. With that intention I cannot sort out myself, say this part is for the theorist, this for the poet, this for the editor, and this for the wayward ethnographer who only wants to document my experience.

Sometimes when I am reading a book I wonder about the politics of the author. Usually I don't know much other than what you can extract directly from the book. That is why I like to occasionally read a biography or autobiography. (I have read a lot about the lives of J.D. Salinger and Joyce Carol Oates and Eudora Welty and Michael Harrington.) With Allison you don't have to wonder. She tells you a lot about her background and beliefs in this book as well as in *Trash*. And it is not hard to figure out that *Bastard* is semiautobiographical. Eventually I expect to read all her books and she will easily be the author I know the most about through self-disclosure.

Dorothy Allison looks back nostalgically to the places she grew up. It must be something in people to be able to look back wistfully on a past that they have described so horrifically.

I become again eight years old, running with my cousins, canvas shoes squeaking in the muck, and the sounds of the shoes pulling free echoing the frogs and crickets and fast-moving night birds. The sky above us filters pink and purple. ...It is a dream full of safety, love, sheer physical pleasure, and the scent of a ripe and beautiful landscape, a landscape that has all but disappeared.

These words appeared in a benefit collection of writing for the Last Great Places Project of the Nature Conservancy. Maybe this is the place where the phrase “indomitable spirit” is apt.

At the point where the book seemed fixed on descriptions of lesbian sex, I considered giving it 4.75 stars. But *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class and Literature* gets better and better as you read on. Dorothy Allison has the ability to immerse you in a story and to understand her experience. She is a marvelous storyteller, but the fact is that many her stories are painful. Her life has sometimes been brutal and you experience that through her writing.

I discovered Dorothy Allison through the GR book group **On the Southern Literary Trail** <http://www.goodreads.com/group/show/6....> Thanks to the people who started that group. It has introduced me to more than several Southern authors and has wonderfully broadened my outlook as a transplant to the South.

This is the third five star book I have read by Dorothy Allison. I am immediately moving on to the short work *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*.

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### **Trixie Fontaine says**

It's a challenge to find books that are relevant to me as a self-publishing internet sex worker and feminist with white trash roots so this book was a huge find for me. While much of it's written from the rawness of Dorothy Allison's personal experiences, she goes way beyond herself to explore sexual, political and artistic issues in ways that are credible and hook you with intimacy while being rational, complex, and critical.

I have a hard time describing how important this book is to me on a personal level without accidentally belittling the scope and value of this collection of essays. It's not some soft "I'm every woman" bundle of affirmations, it's harder (more critical) than that (while also proving that well-written critical thought can also be entertaining and personal) and comes from the perspective of being a social, sexual, political and economic outcast (exactly how I feel).

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