

## Books

# Spittle On a Hot Iron

**Trash.** by Dorothy Allison.  
Firebrand Books, \$8.95.

by Wickie Stamps

"Lord, I've run out of words to say, all  
I can do now is moan."

*Answer Me Dear Jesus*, gospel song

In Dorothy Allison's earlier collection of poetry, *The Women Who Hate Me*, she writes about the silence after a shotgun blast. In *Trash*, her newest collection of short stories, she fills that void with a rare book which, in June '89, won the first annual Lambda Literary Award for Best Lesbian Fiction and Lesbian Small Press. The creation of this slim collection, which tates truth to fiction, was in Allison's eyes an act of sheer survival, her "own shout against death."

Allison's vivid prose rolls through the red clay of the deep South where poverty tore at her family like a rabid dog. She asserts she was "born of a pause of babies" and dropped into a drove of "razorback desperate" relatives. All of *Trash's* central characters, tight-lipped women with set mouths, "had ankles thickened with too many years of flour and babies..." and "...worked themselves ugly."

The entire lot, waitresses, honky tonk managers and child mill workers, daily withstood a rotgut violence that "if you fight back they kill you." Each, like Aunt Alma in *Don't Tell Me You Don't Know*, "understood every-

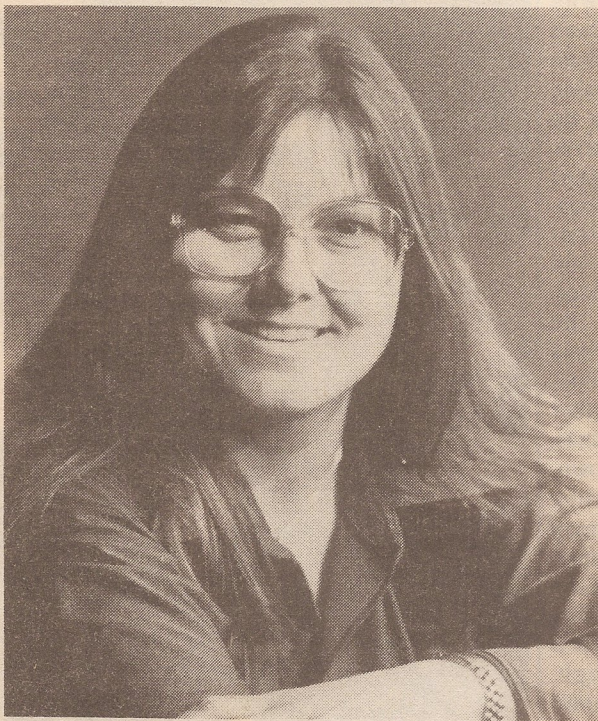
thing, expected nothing, and watched her own life like a terrible fable from a Sunday morning sermon."

Yet *Trash's* women, like cornered rattlesnakes, strike back at their venomous lives. Rage, like spittle on a hot iron, dances throughout each piece (only Yankees are safe from direct mean-spirited railings as they're not worth shit anyway). Some, like Dorothy in *River of Names*, are struck with a blasphemous gift of tongues and periodically break into trance-like fits of cussing,

Grow 'em 'cause it makes people mad...keeps people away, makes sure no one touches what's mine." In *Mama*, Allison's mother reveals the matriarchal rallying cry: "...if people are going to kick you, don't just lie there. Shout back at them."

Throughout *Trash* Allison finds distraction (at times redemption) in food, women, whiskey and feminist politics. Anything "just to be in motion...to change something in the world I wanted desperately to make over..." Each diversion temporarily sops up the burning grief and rage in her belly.

Like any self-respecting southern writer Allison is obsessed with the macabre and attracted to human eccentricities. In *Gospel Song*, a piece on Allison's childhood, she befriends Shannon Pearl, a hateful albino whose appearance is a "shock to the digestion." Allison's motivations for their friendship are truly morbid: "my fascination with her felt more like the restlessness that made me worry the scabs on my ankles...I couldn't put away the need to scratch my ankles, or hang around what Granny called that 'strange and ugly child.'" Shannon's propensity for telling 'dead baby' jokes was a morose trait Allison would later emulate. In *River of Names* Allison is determined to cause a shudder in her privileged lover's "fairy tale life" by telling her "terrible



**FOOD, WOMEN, WHISKEY AND FEMINIST POLITICS**

Dorothy Allison

Photo: Myra Fourwinds

spitting and hissing. Others, like Aunt Alma, are blessed with the evil eye. Locked in her glare "grown men break down and cry...little ones repent and swear to change their ways." In *Lupus*, Cousin Temple has her own unique retaliation: "I got mustard grass, and yellow nettles.

stories."

*Trash* strikes a rare and engaging chord in lesbian fiction. Much like the gospel songs Allison worshiped as a child, her short stories will send chills down your spine and "...make you want to scream low against all the darkness in the world." ▼