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ENGL 2001: Crime, Kids, and Abuse

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Reflection 6: *Bastard Out of Carolina*

*Bastard Out of Carolina* is, undeniably, an incredibly disturbing book with a cast of complex and deeply-flawed characters. In terms of this class, it is an effective primer on the various forms of neglect and abuse that may be inflicted upon a child. Though I did not really like the book and was in fact upset and outright disgusted by much of it, even I can appreciate that these negative feelings are likely what Dorothy Allison intended for her readers to experience while reading the book.

The story is ultimately driven by the characters, who are complex and crudely nuanced individuals. They all exist in a sort of “gray area,” in that no single character in the story is either entirely good or entirely bad. Rather, like all of us out in the “real world,” each character in *Bastard Out of Carolina* has both positive and negative characteristics, with some characters skewing closer to one or the other side of that dichotomy. The things that happen to Bone in the book could not have happened if her family were not made up of several very flawed but sympathetic characters. In fact, many of the things that happen to her are directly *because of* the chaotic and ambivalent environment in which she grew up. Bone’s own decisions to engage in what could be considered criminal activity, such as stealing and breaking into Woolworth’s are also influenced by her upbringing.

Most of Bone’s uncles are described in the story as raging alcoholics, men who like to get in fights and are frequently in and out of prison. To Bone, these stories are not cautionary tales but rather aspirational ones – something she thinks is “cool” and wants to live up to. When Bone and her cousins Grey and Garvey steal candy from the Woolworth’s, Bone describes feeling in awe of her uncle Tommy Lee, who is the “slickest piece of goods in Greenville” (94). Only when Bone’s mother tells her a story about Tommy Lee stealing from his mother does Bone begin to feel ashamed of her own recent shoplifting. Similarly, Bone is enamored by the idea of learning to drink like her uncles. When her uncle Butch offers her a drink after Aunt Ruth’s funeral, she gladly accepts and quickly gets drunk on beer and whiskey. Later, when she wanders into the house while still obviously drunk, there are no consequences for her actions:

“Who slipped you a drink, Bone?” … [Aunt Raylene] didn’t sound that angry. She pushed the door closed behind her and steadied me with one hand. “You’re about falling-down drunk.” (244)

It is implied that underage drinking in the Boatwright family is just so commonplace that a twelve-year-old girl getting blackout drunk at a family gathering is simply not a big deal.

Perhaps the most egregious example of Bone engaging in “wrongful activity” is when she, with the aid of her cousin Grey, breaks into Woolworth’s to smash the display cases and steal everything she and Grey can get their hands on. The impetus for this decision seems to be that Bone simply wants to feel, for once, that she has some kind of power. At this point in the story, it is clear that Bone truly has very little power over her own life and is desperate to feel strong in any way she can. When she tells Grey of her plan, she channels one of her beloved uncles, “[trying] to narrow [her] eyes the way Uncle Earle’s would shrink down when he played poker” (192). The day Bone decides to enact her great plan is the day that she and her family go to see Earle at the county farm. While there, Earle speaks with Bone about power and privilege, namely that though circumstances have made life difficult for the Boatwrights, their collective pride and strength has enabled them to keep going despite the odds:

We’re smart, I thought. We’re smarter than you think we are. I felt mean and powerful and proud of all of us, all the Boatwrights who had ever gone to jail, fought back when they hadn’t a chance, and still held on to their pride. (217)

It is this sentiment that buoys Bone into “fighting back” against the people with more power than she and her family by destroying the Woolworth’s with Grey.

In terms of abuse specifically, many of Bone’s uncles are directly or indirectly abusive towards their wives and other family members. There are too many of these instances to enumerate, including many that are incredibly subtle. The point is that there is a pervasive theme in the Boatwright family that it is acceptable and expected that men will cheat on their wives, that men will fight with one another over small disagreements, that beating one’s child is acceptable as long as it is for a “reason” and doesn’t draw blood. It is only because Bone’s Daddy Glen breaks both these rules that her uncles decide to beat him and teach him a lesson. When Glen, prior to this, beats Bone in the family bathroom on a regular basis, it is not discussed and is actually implicitly condoned by Bone’s mother and the rest of the family. Again, only when this behavior escalates to an “unacceptable” level does the family step in to intervene.

It could be argued that Glen’s treatment of Bone is a “personal” matter and one that is not the extended family’s responsibility to regulate. If that is true, however, then Anney’s tendency to apparently condone his behavior throughout the novel is even more damning to her character. Unlike in most stories that depict domestic violence, Glen does not appear to hit Anney or harm her in any way. Yes, he and Anney frequently get into heated verbal arguments, but he is not depicted as being physically or sexually abusive toward her in the same way he is toward Bone. Instead, Glen’s abusive actions toward Bone seem to be his way of taking out his anger, whether due to his stress about his job or his frustration toward Anney, on Bone. The first time Glen sexually abuses Bone, it is because Anney is currently in labor and he is anxious to find out if the baby will be a boy. He beats her for the first time after being fired from yet another job. Future instances of abuse are all tenuously linked to some major frustration as well – Glen gets fired, he argues with his father, he argues with Anney. In each of these instances, Anney always forgives him eventually and often places the blame on Bone. After Glen beats Bone for the first time, Anney simply asks “‘What did you do? What did you do?’” (107). Another time, she tells Bone to “‘be more careful’” (112).

Near the end of the novel, Bone gives her mother a firm ultimatum in regards to Daddy Glen:

“I won’t go back.” The words were so quiet, so flat, they didn’t seem to have come out of me. But once they were said, some energy seemed to come back to me…

“I know you’ll go back, Mama, and maybe you should. I don’t know what’s right for you, just what I have to do. I can’t go back to live with Daddy Glen. I won’t… no matter what you decide, when you go back to Daddy Glen, I can’t go with you.” (276)

In the end, of course, Glen rapes Bone and Anney chooses to live with him instead of Bone, leaving her to stay with Aunt Raylene. It’s hard for me to even attempt to play devil’s advocate in this situation and suggest that perhaps Anney had good reasons for doing so. I feel that Anney’s actions throughout the novel, and particularly at the end, are atrocious and deeply upsetting. I am unable to understand how she could choose to abandon her daughter in favor of the man who raped her. I don’t believe I have it in me to find any sympathy for her character, simply because I think her actions are so reprehensible. “‘I love you Bone… never forget that,’” says Anney near the end of the book (308). Then she leaves without telling Bone where she’s going, ostensibly with Glen and likely never coming back.

Theoretically, if Glen were removed from the situation, should Anney be able to keep custody of Bone? I’m not sure. From what we see in the novel, Anney does not unconditionally love Bone. Whether this is because Bone is a bastard or because Glen has warped her perception is unclear. Regardless, Anney chooses Glen in the end, so it is difficult to say that she would be the best parent and guardian for Bone. It is implied that Bone stays with Aunt Raylene at the end of the story, a woman who *is* shown to love her unconditionally, to teach her valuable skills and important life lessons. From what we see throughout the book, Raylene is probably the best guardian and surrogate parent Bone could have. I believe Bone’s best chance to lead a “good” life would be to distance herself from her mother and live with Aunt Raylene. I would like to hope that this is how her story continues after the end of the novel.

Bone’s character in *Bastard Out of Carolina* values family more than just about anything else. It is this fact that makes it so tragic that her family, in the end, is who has failed her the most. Though many of the issues plaguing the Boatwrights are systematic and due to their status in society as poor, uneducated people, it is apparent throughout the novel that some of the family’s difficulties are compounded by their own actions. Circumstance *and* personal choice have gotten the Boatwrights where they are. They both are and are not responsible for their own situation. The effects of this conundrum are terrible for Bone and it is the reader’s hope that she will find a way to “rise above” all her misfortune.

Reference:

Allison, Dorothy. *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Penguin Books, 1992.