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ALLISON: And they need all the help they can get. And they need to be held to a high standard and not to become caricatures of themselves. The hardest thing is to persuade them that they don't have to explain. Explaining is the death of good writing. Don't explain. Just put the story on the page and let the reader work it out.

This last year I taught a workshop as part of the Lambda program, and there are ways in which I think that the Lambda Literary Awards — it's very conservative on one level, very. But meanwhile, if you're going to get access to young queers, you still need to step into those venues and do that stuff.

Really interesting young writers. If they all do the work that they could do, it will be a different world. That makes me very hopeful — deeply hopeful. And God, they're going to suffer in the process, and that makes me sad. I wish they had more support. I wish they had just some of the things that I've had. Lord.

ANDERSON: Do you ever wake up here and wonder how you got here?

ALLISON: All the time.

ANDERSON: I mean, you've been in Guerneville for how long? Ten years?

ALLISON: Well, we moved up here just before Wolf was born, and he's 15.

ANDERSON: Okay. So you've been living in a small town in northern California for 15 years.

ALLISON: I took three years out.

ANDERSON: You're the mother of a teenage boy.

ALLISON: Yeah. (laughs)

ANDERSON: You've been in a committed relationship for almost 20 years?

ALLISON: Good God, yes.

ANDERSON: This is not the life you imagined 20 years ago.

ALLISON: But I never imagined living this long either.

ANDERSON: No, you didn't, but this also doesn't resemble how you were setting yourself up.

ALLISON: No, no, and I try constantly to have it not become predictable or easy. Life will correct you, life will shake you up. Stuff happens. The criminal enterprises of this government — and then people die that you love, and you look again at your life. Also, watching lesbians get old,

the older lesbian community, because now I'm getting to be an older lesbian. (laughs) We don't take care of our own very well, and we don't provide resources, and what safety net was in place is gone. That's scary. Meanwhile, I've stumbled into being middle class.

ANDERSON: How did that happen? Beyond the success of your books.

ALLISON: I married well.

ANDERSON: Yeah, you did. Is that a comfortable place for you to be, calling yourself middle class? This life, this whole –

ALLISON: No, no. I also don't believe it. And that is another fight, because there is a lot of — I'm raising a middle-class child, and I've been enjoying having a middle-class childhood with him, but I grew up in my family. And one of the things that I talk about constantly is that, if you're shaped in a working-class family, even if you manage to find some margin by which you begin to live a middle-class existence, you were still shaped by and you are the product of that family. You are still essentially working class. There is stuff I can't change, is just not going to change, and it's a constant struggle in my family.

My son is invariably teasing me because I have to have canned food in the cupboard — have to — and he is constantly going through the canned food, explaining to me that I've got old canned food that's going to kill him, and then he makes jokes about it. He can. He's been raised middle class. It's not a joke to me. I begin to panic.

I'm bad at money. I'm bad at taking care of money, paying bills, paying taxes, because I have all these places of conditioned panic and desperation that come out of being raised poor. The places where I become fearful, hesitant, and wrong-headed are essentially about having been raised poor in this culture and in a state of contempt, which is a working-class life. Middle-class people don't have those fault line breaks.

Now, the criminal thing that we do is that we take the children of the working class and we give them scholarships and send them to college, and then we tell them they're not working class. But they work through the world out of the patterns that were taught to them and ingrained in them. So, you know, I can remember the socialists and the commies talking about the bourgeoisie, and the worst of the bourgeoisie is the middle class that got a little cash. We are the petite bourgeoisie, and we are easily criminalized. We easily go bad because we're fearful. Yes, goddammit, we're fearful. We are still the working class. We just have a little more access to resources. It doesn't mean we know how to use those resources or that we trust them. We can't even act in our own self-interest sometimes. It's that much damage.

We need a more complicated way to talk about it, particularly for all those kids that got scholarships, went off to college, lost their families of origin — because there is that break that happens, and

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you've got to do some work to get your family back once that break has happened. But we don't genuinely become middle class. We don't genuinely have access to things.

In my relationship with Alix, the complicated stuff that I have learned — because she was raised middle class. So she has — I call it the sense of entitlement that she was raised with. She believes that she is entitled to certain things. I don't, I can't. I fight desperately to make myself act as if I do, but I do not have that thing.

One of the reasons that makes our relationship successful is that, as a teenager, she fell out of that network and went off to — she went to jail and a halfway house, and became an alcoholic and lived on the street, and got an immersion in working-class life that changed her profoundly, but it didn't make her working class. She went off to jail and acted like a middle-class girl and, you know, they were generous with her and didn't kill her and taught her a few things, but she had all of that conditioning. She's still who she was. All the stuff that has changed in the life that she has lived since — living on the streets, being a drunk, getting sober, joining the army, getting kicked out — she still has all that conditioning and that sense of entitlement that I can't acquire. I can't acquire it. And my boy has it, and I worked hard that he should have it because it gives you a lot more safety and power in this culture.

We don't even have a language for talking about a lot of this stuff, and it means that we work against our own interests. A lot of these working-class academics are working against their own interests, and they don't even understand it. When you tell them, Yes, you're still working class, you're still a part of your tribe. You can speak on events at this new tribe that you joined, but you're still a product of your tribe. It has a huge impact to tell them that they still are who they were, because they're being robbed. You need to take pride in your people and speak for them.

ANDERSON: Does Wolf have a sense of being a part of your people that way?

ALLISON: He's scared to death of my people. He's met them. (laughs) He talks about my sisters as *the scary aunts*. He's right. My sisters are scary. I love them but, yeah, they get — you know. It's a different world, growing up in a queer family in northern California.

ANDERSON: Yeah. So they don't feel like his people to him.

ALLISON: I think that he's just at the point where he's beginning to do self-definition — 15, adolescence. He's a young 15. So we're just beginning to watch that happen.

He takes enormous pride in Alix and me, and he has already gotten in fights defending us. And he has a sense of us, and he identifies as a bisexual, when I can tell you, frankly, I don't see any bi in him. The boy falls in love with boys. But who knows who he's

going to be or how that is all going to work out, but he identifies that he is essentially queer, and he's already paid for it. Even in northern California, it's an embattled position. He was ten the first time that it was made clear to him how dangerous it was to be who he was. And we have done everything we can to protect him and to educate him and to hold the world accountable and go to school. I go to PTA, Jesus God!

But it is still a struggle, and it is going to be a struggle. I think it's going to get more complicated because I think he's going to be a codependent kid, because he's a caretaker. He loves us, and I have my stuff, and he's always, he wants to take care of his mommas. Ooh, now there's stuff about that that's wonderful and admirable, but I've been through incest survivors groups and ACA meetings, and I know where it can also go, and, Lord help him, he's going to grow up and buy his boyfriend a car. Oh, (sighs) I have to talk to him more about that. We try to talk to him a lot about how real life works and some of this stuff.

ANDERSON: Is it a struggle for you to parent?

ALLISON: Oh Christ, yes, and it's scary, very frightening. Alix is — I wouldn't have done it with anyone else. Some of the virtues are her particular matrix, her particular kind of butch and the risks she's willing to take, but also that she's been sober so long. She just has a lot of tools in place.

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It's peculiar, the mesh of the sober community and the feminist community. There's an enormous amount of information and power there that has been vital to my life. I'm not really an alcoholic or a drug addict. In my family, it's the boys who have those problems. I'm just bent and deeply broken, but I use all the resources of those communities, and it's made a huge difference.

But it's sometimes so astonishing to me to sit up and look around, living in this beautiful place, in this family that I adore. Thank God I've got them, because the rest of the country is really sucking a big egg right now. I don't believe in it, don't trust it. I try to keep in mind that it's a privilege and a wonder to occupy this place, and I get to do work that I love. I mean, it's always tricky about making a living as a writer, and people think you're rich. You have a movie, you must be rich. Yeah, right, son. God, I'm still a dyke, unemployable in most places in the world. It's a real struggle. And at the same time, it's an enormous privilege.

I tell young writers that there is a kind of way in which you will always be poor if you're a queer writer. You will. You'll never make the money that heterosexuals make, it's a fact. And as a writer, you will never make the money that a lot of other enterprises will make. But this is a poverty that is, by comparison to the poverty I have known, so genteel, so much easier.

Oh God, but it does — Part of why I live where I live is you can live up here in this small-town, semi-rural environment. We couldn't survive in San Francisco. I'd have to make more money, and I wouldn't

be able to raise my child in the middle-class way in which I want to raise him. I want him to have all that access to resources that I never had. It is a wonder and a privilege.

The wealth though. The richest thing in my life has been the people I have known. Let's be clear. I'm not being sentimental or small when I say this. I've known extraordinary people who gave their full selves to changing the world. Do you know what I mean? Who believed in something larger than themselves. So many people in the world have no concept of that. Who live their lives in self-contempt, in self-hatred, in meaninglessness, in feeling that they have no purpose. I have been among people who knew themselves to have purpose, who shared that purpose with me. They have been my friends and my lovers. I could die tomorrow, and it has been an extraordinary journey. I just don't want to die tomorrow.

ANDERSON: And you live in California, so you probably won't. You've still got your acupuncturist.

ALLISON: Well, with any luck, I can help put this administration in jail, and then do the work to — We're going to have to do so much work in the world, as Americans, over the next few decades. Oy vey.

ANDERSON: And writing is going to be a huge part of that.

ALLISON: Yeah.

ANDERSON: It's going to be your stories (inaudible) translate.

ALLISON: It's also one of the things saving us now. I literally teach all over the world and get paid to do it, which is kind of miraculous. Pity I don't get paid as well as I'd like to be, but — Going to other countries and meeting people — they read our books. They know that the war that we're engaged in, the criminal actions that this country has been engaged in recently, do not reflect the majority of this country. They read our literature, and in our literature we are occasionally our best selves. I believe in that. It's a reason to write. And in our literature we have created a feminist presence that is powerful. It has changed us, it has changed this country, it has changed the world. A lot of people don't keep track of it, but even the most fearful conservative people in America have an imagination of how they want their girls to live that is entirely a product of what have managed — some of it the literature, some of it the education. It's a different world for that reason.

ANDERSON: Absolutely.

ALLISON: So there is feminism, even though very few people want to own the name anymore.

ANDERSON: That's true. Thank you. We're out of time.

ALLISON: Good.

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END TAPE 5

END OF INTERVIEW

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