

DENISE GIARDINA
In Their Own Country transcript

1 Denise: Some of the scenes, they really are - I just love to get into them. Especially when I'm at the meat of something. It's exciting to have these characters banging against each other, is the way I think of it. It's just like throw them in the scene, and just let them bang on each other!
(both laugh)

Kate: And that's the voice of Denise Giardina! I'm Kate Long, and you're listening to *In Their Own Country*, a radio series that - each week - brings you an hour with one of the best contemporary fiction writers or poets West Virginia has produced. This time, it's MacDowell County native, Denise Giardina, whose novels have earned some reviews other writers would crawl to California to get.

From the *Los Angeles Times*: "Brilliant, diamond-hard fiction, heart-wrenching, tough and tender." From the *Washington Post*: "great narrative force, full of anger, wisdom and redemption, rendered with skill and authority."

In her first four novels, she wrote about subjects from the mine wars to King Henry V to World War II resistance to Hitler. Denise is a seminary graduate. The critics take her very seriously. But she herself is charmingly modest.

Kate: Do you ever read back through your books?

Denise: I haven't yet. I keep telling myself that when I'm old, that I should sit down and read 'em, maybe one after the other. I know I've forgotten a lot of the things I put in there. Every now and then, I do open up to a page or something and just read it and see if it still holds up, and I'll think "Did I write that?" Writing for me is kind of like going underwater. You come up for air eventually, and everything's more normal again.

2 So, I'm not sure when I'm writing that I actually know what I'm writing. I'm just telling a story, but I don't really know what it is.

Kate: A number of writers have said that, and I think that's hard for a non-writer to understand what that would be. What are you doing when you write?

Denise: Basically, I'm following people around. I'm sort of like spying on them, or listening to what they say. Watching what they do. Sometimes I feel like I'm maybe trying to manipulate them a little bit and sort of saying, "What if you did this?" And then I watch them and see what they do.

Kate: Mmm-hmmm. I know a Charleston man who did a lot of writing once told me that he was writing about a Confederate soldier, and I said, "Well, what's he going to do?" And he said, "I dunno. He hasn't moved yet."

cut like someone drew around the edges with a pencil before they trimmed, and he's wearing a turtle-neck shirt. "We need a place to set up," he says. "Where's the cafeteria?"

"We don't have a cafeteria," Miss Cox said. "We serve the children at the kitchen door and they eat at their desks."

"Then where's the library?"

"There's no library either. We keeps books in each room." She points to the bookshelf near the window.

"That's no good," says Phil Vivante. "We need lots of space to give out the shoes. I guess we'll have to film in the hallway."

"It's OK, Phil," says a bald man who comes in the room. "The hall has a nice bleakness."

"What shoes?" Miss Cox asks.

"A shoe company in Paramus, NJ heard about your problems here. They sent several boxes of their product for Christmas. We thought we'd film the distribution." He goes back in the hall and the TV men come in and out with cords and plugs and lights on tall metal poles. Miss Cox tries to teach about the planets, but we keep looking at the doors, so she gives up and says that people want to see television shows about Appalachia because they think we are stupid and backward, and they can't figure out why. She says we are not stupid or backward and are just as good as anybody. But she says it low, and she keeps glancing at the door like she thinks somebody might come in and take her away.

We line up to get our lunches, corn dogs and macaroni and cheese and carrot sticks and pineapple slices. Toejam Day trips on a fat, black TV cord and spills his lunch, but Miss Cox gets him another one. Toejam usually doesn't eat the school lunch because he can't afford it. But the principal says everyone gets a free lunch today, a present from the Board of Education.

The TV men sit on the staircase and eat their lunch. They hold the corn dogs sideways and look at them before they take a bite.

After lunch, we carry our trays back to the kitchen. The TV men have stacked lots of big boxes on the stairway. The boxes say Parkway Shoe Company. Phil Vivante tells the bald man to turn the boxes sideways so the name won't show. "No free advertising," he says. He makes Miss Cox sit at a table with a pile of shoes beside her. The shoes are ugly. Some are pink tennis shoes. Others are square boys' shoes that look hard as rocks.

We go back to our desks, but Phil Vivante comes in and tells us to line up. Brenda Lloyd, who sits beside me whispers, "I don't want any of them shoes."

I raise my hand. Phil Vivante says "What is it?"

Denise: Yeah. They weren't allowed to gather in the coal camps at that time. If more than two men were seen talking on the street, the mine guards would come break it up. They didn't want the men communicating among themselves. And so they were not allowed to have meetings. But of course, Bible study's safe, you know. Some fools always think the Bible is safe when it's not. It's probably the most dangerous book there is.

It totally turns the order of things upside down. You know, the first are last, and the last are first. You love your enemies, you don't hate them.. You give you life in order to save it. Our value systems, our power structures are built on, he undermines them totally.

Kate: And Albion became a coal miner in that spirit.

Denise: He has much the same impulse that Dietrich Bonnhoeffer has when he goes back to Germany and says he, actually he can't criticize the German people for not speaking out against Hitler if he's not willing to go back and share with them the suffering that they're going to undergo too. So there's this sense that you can't stand on the sidelines and criticize.

music

19 Kate: You are sometimes described as an Appalachian writer. But you said you feel it's more accurate to be called a theological writer.

Denise: Yeah, that's the thing that ties all four books together. There are really only two of the four novels that are set in the Appalachian region. And even those deal with international and national issues and people.

The Appalachian region's never been isolated, the way the myth sort of has it. And so there's certainly no reason why Appalachian literature should take place in isolation either. But I do think woman writer, Appalachian writer, political writer, theological writer, but I think the one that makes the most sense to me is that I write literature that deals with theological questions.

Kate: I can see that. Denise's novels cover a wide range of times and places. But every book has at least one character who feels a very strong call - usually from God - to do something hard and dangerous. That person usually could do something else that would be more comfortable, so they have this choice.

For instance, Denise's fourth novel about Dietrich Bonnhoeffer, a German priest who becomes part of a plot to kill Hitler.

Denise: Every main character, as I think about it, is in some way dealing with that. Certainly the characters I write about, they're risking their lives in a lot of ways. Whether it's becoming a priest in central America, or speaking out against Hitler, or becoming a union organizer at a time when that could get you killed. Being a king at a time when a lot of the people in your country wanted to get rid of you. All those things are pretty scary. And the characters have to learn to

live faithfully and fairly fearlessly, I think, in spite of all that. They have to do what they have to do.

Kate: For instance, in *Saints and Villains*, your fourth book, Dietrich Bonhoeffer asks another character, “How do you know when you’re called? How do you know a real call?”

Denise: Yeah. And I think he says, “I hope you never get one.” (laughs) But, I would say that it’s like a fire that keeps burning until you get moving...

Everybody gets called to do things. And I think we all have moments in which we feel compelled to do something. And maybe not everybody acts on it. And that may be a source of misery for a lot of people.

Kate: How did you find Dietrich Bonhoeffer? And theology in general?

Denise: When I came back to West Virginia, I met a wonderful priest, Jim Lewis, who turned me on to theology. He gave me Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison*, for example.

So I was reading theology and coming to understand that you could bring your brain along when you made the faith journey. That you didn’t have to turn your brain off. That you didn’t have to interpret the Bible literally, that there were other ways to interpret it. And I just wanted to study that more. I was borrowing so many books from Jim. And finally I said, “You know, I really don’t want to leave West Virginia, but maybe I should think about going to seminary.”

He said, “It’s about time! I wondered when you were going to say that.”

20 Kate: Denise graduated from Virginia Theological Seminary when she was 28. Instead of getting ordained as a priest, she started writing.

Denise: I don’t think I could have written what I’ve written without being at seminary. Right after I graduated that I started *Good King Harry*. I’d wanted to write *Good King Harry* for ten years, but really didn’t know what I was saying in *Good King Harry* or anything else. It wasn’t till I went to seminary and learned more and thought more and got exposed to theological questions and ways of thinking, that I was able to get a sense of what I was writing about.

Kate: Were you thinking about Harry during that time in theological terms?

Denise: Yeah, I think it was during seminary, that I began to understand some of the existential questions of good and evil, sin and redemption. And the Augustinian idea that you can’t escape sin. That there’s no possibility not to sin. That’s what he says.

And that really grounded a lot of my thinking for *Good King Harry*, and also beyond. I think in all the books people try to do what’s right. And sometimes they do what’s right, and bad comes out of it. And it’s just not something that you can escape.

Denise: She does feel her call. She's actually probably less questioning of it than a lot of the characters are. She doesn't fret about ethical issues so much. She just kind of, she gets out there and does something.

music

23 Kate: The existentialists used to talk about committed literature, literature that has a message to the larger society. As a matter of fact, they felt that that was the highest calling of literature.

Denise: I think literature should engage the world. That's the way I would put it. It should fight with the world. It should, it should come from a place beyond the values of the world, I guess.

It should be a world that stands on its own and that challenges the world that we're in. Not that mirrors it necessarily, but that challenges it to be more than what it is.

music

24 Kate: Well, there's one character that appears in almost all of Denise's writing that we haven't talked about yet. The mountains.

Denise: The mountains, to me, are more than just a muse. They are even a reason for existence, somehow. They shape the psyche; I think of anyone who lives here. And when I'm away from them, I feel naked. So in that sense, it's not just the thing that sparks my imagination. They're like, you know, your skull protects your brain. You know? (laughs) And the mountains protect your psyche.

And it's a landscape that forces people to adapt to it, for the most part. There's a horrible exception going on right now, in terms of mountaintop removal. But in general, this landscape dictates to you. It says "You will have to put your house here, because there's no room anywhere else.

That's a landscape that reminds human beings of their frailty, I think. And one of the upsetting things to me about mountaintop removal, blowing apart the mountains, is that we really are saying, "No, we can destroy this landscape too." It's a human arrogance, I think, going on.

music

28 Kate: And while the time travel book was still a seed, she was running for governor.

Denise: The joke I've told about it is that I was between books and couldn't figure out what to write next, so I just decided to run for governor as my way of dealing with writer's block. (laugh) But it did time out actually that way. I had finished a book, and I didn't know what I was going to do next. And I was just really disturbed by a real increase in the practice of mountaintop removal here in West Virginia. I could just see coming up an election where Democrat and Republican run, and neither one who would be even interested in talking about that issue, unless somebody forced them to. So I really ran to talk about issues.

And I was kind of curious to know, how far can you get with no money, but just saying what you think, trying to be accessible to the press, and just being open and honest. And the answer is: not very far (laughs) politically. But I think it did change the campaign. I think it would have been a different campaign if I hadn't run.

Kate: And how did it change you?

Denise: Well, that's a good question. I'm not sure I've totally sorted out how it changed me. It did force me to be up front with what I believe. And it forced me out of myself. I tend to be a shy person. It made me quicker on my feet in terms of speaking. I met a lot of really neat people: all walks of life, all political stripes. Found, for example, that I had more in common with people who I would consider religiously conservative than I thought I would have had. And saw a lot of the state that I hadn't seen in a long time. So it was overall a good experience.

29 Kate: It seems to me that you're right hand in hand with your own characters. Trying to do something about the things that you care about, in more than one way.

Denise: Yeah, I think the things that are important in life are things to be written about and also acted upon too. Just as there's no one right political strategy, there's also no one right way to deal with those things. You can write about them, and you can talk about them. You can be an activist on behalf of them. And so forth. All at once, think.

I do feel called to write the books I write. I don't think I could write them if I didn't because the whole process is such a mystery. It usually doesn't feel like something I'm doing. It's something that's been given to me, and I couldn't write a book that someone assigned me. It has to be something that's given to me.

I think that's true in a lot of people's lives. If we try to be in tune with the spiritual, then when we listen to what we should be doing, then we go out and do what we're called to do.

I want to be involved in the world. No offense to Emily Dickinson, but I'm not an Emily Dickinson. I'm not interested in hiding away in my house and sort of not being involved. I hope

that the books I write are really interesting. But I want to have an interesting life too. I want to live life. I don't want to just read about it or write about it.

music

30 Kate: It's too bad we can't get all these people in one room and let them talk to each other. Carrie and Bonnhoeffer and Harry. (both laugh)

Denise: That would be great!

Kate: They'd find out they'd all been thinking very similar things in very different circumstances.

Denise: Well, one of the hardest things for a writer, I think - and I really realize it because I go back and read some of this stuff aloud and kind of meet these characters again - is that they're so alive. And when I'm writing the book, they're so alive. And I have all these conversations with them myself. But when you're finished writing, it's almost like they're dead. You don't see them again. You don't talk to them again.

And so, I'm realizing that I miss them, actually. (laughs) So it would be nice to get them all in a room and kind of have a big reunion. (laughs)

They could share some fried chicken and potato salad and (laughs) talk about their lives.

Kate: Hitler and the union and everything else.

Denise: And they could tell Henry where he went wrong. Henry, you shouldn't've gone to France! You should've stayed home! (laughing)

Kate: And that is West Virginia novelist Denise Giardina. And this is *In Their Own Country*. I'm Kate Long. Thanks for listening.

In Their Own Country is produced and edited by Kate Long. Music was performed by Bob Webb, Tim Courts, Robin Kessinger, and John Blizzard. Bob Webb recorded the music and supplied production assistants. Francis Fished provided technical mentoring and production assistants. James Mohammed is West Virginia Public Radio's program director.

Copyright 2002 Kate Long, owner of non-broadcast rights. Help yourself for classroom use or non-broadcast community presentations. Any broadcast use of the recorded material requires the permission of WV Public Broadcasting. The author's published material in *In Their Own Country* is used with the permission of the rights owners. All other rights retained by the rights owners. Non-broadcast educational use is permitted by The Fair Use Act. For other non-broadcast use, contact Kate Long at katewv7777@gmail.com.

