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 <u>doing</u> 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."

Denise: Yeah. That happens a lot. I often think of it as, they haven't told me yet what they're gonna do. I keep waiting for the characters to tell me if they're going to fall in love with a certain person, or if they're going to go to bed with them or not, or what's going to happen. And sometimes it takes them a while to tell me. They go at their own pace, rather than mine.

Kate: What do you do to get yourself in a position where you can hear them tell you what they're going to do?

Denise: Well, I find, I need to not have a lot of distractions in my life. If I do, then I can't hear the characters. I'm finding now as I get older that I can balance teaching and writing now better than I used to be able to. But I still need a life that's fairly uncluttered. I can be busy, but it can't be stuff that I'm fretting about. If I'm fretting, I can't write.

Kate: It's hard to write when you're running for governor.

Denise: Well, I didn't do any writing when I was running for governor. I did do some researching.

Kate: In the year 2000, a lot of people were surprised when this shy, down-to-earth woman ran for governor. But by the time this program is over, you may see how naturally that fits into who she is, and what she writes about. But first, let's hear some of that writing.

3 Here's a scene many West Virginians will recognize.

Denise: This is set during the 1960s, during the War on Poverty, when Appalachia was on the TV every night. This is actually based on a true story that a friend told me happened at his school.

Kate: From the *Unquiet Earth*. The speaker is a schoolgirl named Jackie.

The television people have come to Blackberry Creek, right to my school at Felco. They're making a news show about Christmas in Appalachia, and they have television cameras with those eyes painted on them. I keep looking for Walter Cronkite, but Mom says he didn't come with them. Mom brought them to the school because they spent the morning in their clinic. She is aggravated. I can tell by the way she holds her mouth shut tight like her teeth are stuck together with bubble gum. She talks to my teacher, Miss Cox, while the television men make noise in the hallway.

"They make me feel like a specimen in a jar," my mom says. She waves to me and leaves, and a television man comes in the room. He tells Miss Cox his name is Phil Vivante. He has black hair

[&]quot;What are they like?" Miss Cox asked.

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?"

"Some of us don't need them," I say. "And some of us don't want them."

He looks at me like, if he was a teacher, he would spank me. Then he glances around the room. "How many of you need shoes?" he asks. No one raises their hand. Lots of them do need shoes, but they would rather have their tongues pulled out than to say so. "Great," says Phil Vivante. He looks at his watch. Then he says, "How many want to be on TV?" We all raise our hands. "Good," he says. "Line up."

4 Denise: One of my memories burned into my childhood is seeing all these TV shows about Appalachia. On the one hand, I did live in one of the poorest parts of Appalachia. On the other hand, I didn't recognize my place at all in a lot of ways, in terms of the attitude that people had toward us, and this sense that we were somehow defective, or we had no culture, no traditions, and no history. It just gave me a real bad self-image about the place, or the way people thought about the place.

And I think all the people I knew when I was a kid felt the same way. We were ashamed and embarrassed to see these images of us on the TV. And it had another negative outcome in that it did keep us also from looking at our problems, because there were certainly problems there. So there was almost a denial that there was anything wrong. And that's not good either.

5 Kate: Another scene from The Unquiet Earth: Jackie thinks she can't be a writer because she lives in a coal camp. The coal company has given her camp this name: Number 13.

Denise: And she says - "I get a notebook and figure I would write a real story with a happy ending. But it never worked. I'm not a real writer. Real writers live in New York apartments or sit at sidewalk cafes in Paris.

Sometimes I study Number 13 from my front porch. The houses used to be white, but now they are faded grey with coal dust, and their paint is peeling. They sit all close together. In the dusk, I can pretend it is not Number 13. It is the German village where the Grimm Brothers told their stories. And the coal camp houses are really cottages like where Hansel and Gretal lived, cottages lit with candles and lanterns instead of cheap lamps from the 5 and 10.

But it is still the same old Number 13. In one house, Homer Day reads the Bible while his wife Luella heats up bacon grease for the wild greens Toejam picked for supper. It is all they will have to eat. Nearby, Homer's brother Hassel and Junior Tagget sit on a vinyl couch outside Hassel's trailer. Across the street, Uncle Brigham Young is getting drunk. And I can hear the TV turned up loud through the open screen door. Betty and the kids are watching Bonanza, and Uncle Brigham is hollering at them to turn down the damn noise. My mom is working her halfacre in the camp garden, trying to finish hoeing some tomatoes before it gets dark.

So there is not a thing to write about, only hillbillies. And nobody cares to hear about hillbillies. I go inside to watch TV.

Kate: Did you ever feel like that when you were a kid?

Denise: Yeah, that's actually one of the most autobiographical scenes I've done was that scene right there. Because...

6 I really did think it'd be fun to be a writer, but I never dreamed that I could. Because I did think you had to write about sophisticated things. I didn't know of any writers from West Virginia. So I had no role models. And I thought nobody would want to write stories about where I was from. I mean, good grief, that was just the last thing in my mind, that somebody would actually like to read a book that was set in West Virginia. So yeah, I was in my twenties before I started getting enough confidence to start writing.

Kate: By then, she realized that she had a rich well of life experience and stories to draw from.

7 Denise: I grew up in a coal camp called Black Wolf, which was small as a coal camp goes. There were ten houses. And for those people who don't know what a coal camp is, it's a town that's built and owned by a coal company. They own the houses, and the houses are all painted the same color, and all pretty much the same style and shape. They're just little boxes. And they're built real close together. And so everybody kind of lived on top of each other. Pretty much knew everybody else's business.

That used to drive my mom crazy, actually. You could hear through the walls practically, and you've got people on either side of you. But we'd be eating dinner and one of the neighbor kids would just walk in the house and sit down and start eating with us, or visiting or whatever. It was kind of like living in a big dormitory in that way, really (laughs). And it was hard to lose all that.

I was twelve years old in 1962, and the coal companies there began, first of all, selling off all the houses. Then as soon as they sold them to everybody, then they laid everybody off. Which I thought was very nice of them (sarcasm in voice, laughs).

So everybody left. People had no jobs and pretty much knew that they weren't going to get any more jobs in McDowell County. The county itself lost about half of its population at that point, as a whole.

It was just a very sad time. I had had this close community there. And all of the sudden, it wasn't there anymore. Everybody was leaving, including my family. There was a period of almost a year when we didn't know if my dad was going to get another job or not somewhere else, and then we did move away. And I went back, just three or four years later, as a high school student. And there was nothing left. They had just come along and torn all the houses down.

I go back now, the coal camp where my grandparents, my Italian grandparents lived is no longer there. And the coal camp where my maternal grandparents lived, and where my grandfather managed a company store, is no longer there. And my town is no longer there. So there's no place to go back to, really, to see where I grew up.

8 Kate: Even as a child, Denise was bothered by injustice, even when she got the benefit of it.

Denise: The company added a fifth room onto our house because my father was a bookkeeper, not a miner, and so, more deserving of extra space. No one else's house was improved.

Kate: And the way you say that, I can tell that that was something that you minded.

Denise: It did bother me. It bothered me that we couldn't do anything to our houses unless they let us. And it bothered me that they made our house a little nicer than everybody else's. You know, it was nice to have my own bedroom, but I also was aware even then of the unfairness of it

Kate: Bothered by the unfairness. Now, that's a key to the writing and character of Denise Giardina. And here's another key, from an autobiographical article, "Coalfield Ancestors."

9 Denise: My father's father, Sam Giardina, came to West Virginia from San Giorgio, a village on the north coast of Sicily near Patti. Like many Sicilian immigrants, he did not plan to stay in the coalfields. He wanted to make his fortune in America, the land of opportunity and the quick buck, then return home to farm.

Kate: Sam got a job in the mines, married, had five kids, saved some money. Then he took his family back to Sicily. But the family farm wasn't workable anymore, so he brought his family back to McDowell County, and went back into the mines. Denise's dad was his youngest son.

Denise: My father was befriended by a childless schoolteacher who sent him to business school. He returned to West Virginia as an accountant, tending ledgers in coal company offices, a lower cog in the wheel of management, successful participant in the American Dream of raising oneself above and benefitting from what destroys others. I, his child, am also a beneficiary of that dream, and I have made only a guilty peace with the legacy.

Kate: Denise has vivid memories of her grandparents who spoke little English. Their house was a magical place for a child.

Denise: Every inch of wall covered with portraits of presidents and popes, funeral home calendars, crucifixes and pietas, plastic flowers, dried palm leaves, saved from decades of Palm Sunday masses, prints of tortured Christs and weeping Virgins and tailed red devils and angels with halos like gold phonograph records framing their heads.

Kate: Denice soaked in her grandmother's belief in spirits.

Denise: Once or twice I crept to the top of the landing, imagination alert for demons and fairies who would shriek at me in Sicilian and pursue me back down the steps.

Kate: Denise knew Sam Giardina - her grandfather - in the last years of his life.

Nonna Sam was that rare creature, a coal miner who lived to extreme old age. He was small and stooped, and when he hugged me goodbye, it felt as though there was not a soft spot on him. He always had a sharp stubble of beard on his chin that scraped a child's skin, and he smelt of pipe smoke. He took a small glass of dry, red wine with his meals, and he walked everywhere he went, grumbling to himself, several miles a day to town and back until a few weeks before his death in 1977. He died at the age of 97, looking tiny and caved-in as a mummy on his hospital bed. At his funeral, a young girlfriend appeared with her five-year-old daughter. (Sara having passed away nine years earlier.) It was heartening to see the child, the half-sister of my already elderly father.

10 Kate: Sam Giardina first came to West Virginia from Sicily in the early 1900s. Denise's second novel, *Storming Heaven*, is set during that same time period - partly in a coal camp. In this scene, we hear the voice of Rondall Lloyd, future union organizer.

Denise: Earliest thing I recall from when I was a boy is Daddy coming in from the mines and taking his bath. It always scared me when he came in. It was way after dark, and I'd be asleep with Talcott and Kerwin in the bed in the front room. Most nights, he'd come in quiet, just lay himself down, coal dust and all, on a mat behind the cookstove in the kitchen, so as not to track dirt into the rest of the house. He would be back out before dawn anyway, so there was no need to bathe. But on Saturday, Mommy boiled water, rattled coal in the buckets to throw on the fire, pulled out the Number Three washtub. I could never sleep through the noise. I always lay on the side of the bed next to the door, so I could hang my head over the edge and watch her. Daddy would stomp onto the back porch, peel off his boots, and bang them against the steps to knock off the crusts of mud and coal dust. He stripped off his clothes and left them in a heap for Mommy to wash the next day. She never washed his mine clothes with the rest of our things. Then Daddy came inside. His face and hands were black and shiny; the rest of him was pale and waxy like lard. The whites of his eyes were vivid. He tossed his pay envelope on the kitchen table.

"Snake again," was all he would say, meaning he hadn't been able to mine enough coal to pay off the bills at the company store, that he still owed for food and doctoring and his work tools and blasting powder, that his paycheck had a single wavy line where the money figures should have been.

Kate: After *Storming Heaven* came out, there was at least one review that said that it couldn't possibly have been that bad in the coal camps. How do you react to that?

Denise: Yeah, that was in the *New York Times*. And I just felt like he was an idiot basically. (both laugh) I mean, just naive. Or something.

music

11 Denise: *Storming Heaven* follows several families in the mountains through a period of time from 1890 through 1921, a period of time in West Virginia which was called the coal mine wars. Which, as you can tell by the name, was a fairly turbulent time.

Kate: One family Denise follows is the Lloyds, the coal-mining family we just saw. Another is the Bishops, a mountain farming family. They live not far away from the Lloyds, in an area that doesn't have coal mining yet, which makes a contrast.

Denise: One of the main characters is Carrie Bishop, who's a young girl at the beginning.

Kate: When Carrie grows up, she falls in love with Rondall, the boy in the coal camp. But here, she's a child, imagining her Uncle Alec as a spirit.

12 Denise: Uncle Alec had been dead for a long time, killed in the war between the states. "You think he's a ghost?" I asked. "You think he still yet comes around here, and that's why you can't forget him?"

Aunt Jane smiled. "Maybe. Sometimes I feel him close. But if'n he's a ghost, he's a contented one. He walks for joy, not for disquiet."

I began to watch for him then. I thought he walked abroad in the fog. The mist rose from the river in the morning to cling to the mountaintops. And in the evenings after a rainshower, patches of fog ran like a herd of sheep up the hillsides. I would go out then, breathe the air and feel it clean the bottom of my lungs.

A path wandered behind the cabin, down to the riverbank. Grapevine was broad and green, slow-running, never more than waist-deep on a grown man, save during the spring thaw. I waded into the water, my skirt hiked to my thighs. Silver explosions of trout churned the water, and minners started fuelishly about my legs.

I came abreast a stand of cattails and halted. The sweep of Grapevine curved away north, its path to Shelby and the Leviasy hidden by the far mountains, one after another, the mist dancing up their flanks.

Every way I turned, the lush green peaks towered over me. Had it been winter or spring, they would have been iron-grey or dappled with pink and white dogwood, sarvis and redbud. But

always they would be there, the mountains, their heights rounded by the elements, like relics worn smooth by the hands of reverent pilgrims.

I swept my hand up and flung water like beads of glass. "Hey, Uncle Alec," I whispered.

music

13 Kate: Denise's family left Black Wolf in McDowell County after her dad got another accountant job with another coal company. They moved just outside Charleston.

Denise: Charleston, to me, has always been very cosmopolitan. (laughs) Just because, when I was a little kid, we would occasionally come to Charleston as a treat. I remember going to Shoney's and having fudge cake and Big Boy hamburgers. And we didn't have that in McDowell County. And the Capitol building. And all the stores. It just always seemed very glamorous to me. So all of the sudden, I had access to that. And that was, that was good, I think.

I also had access to more library materials. So I was kind of a dork (laughs). Most of my high school years, my hobby was researching Henry V! (laughs)

Kate: How did you meet Henry V when you were a teenager? And what caused a teenage girl to spend her time researching King Harry?

Denise: Well, it's kind of funny. I read another novel about him, and he actually is very appealing to a teenage girl. When you stop to think about it, he was not supposed to be king, but his father murders the real king. So all of the sudden, he's going to have to be king someday. And he's living this wild life. He's hanging out in bars and carousing, drinking and getting in trouble. And everybody's saying he's going to be a lousy king. But he fools them when he actually does become king.

So as a teenage girl, I'm reading this. He was supposed to be very good-looking. He was a womanizer. And then he became this responsible king. And then he died young. You know, so.

Denise: Her tenth-grade teacher gave her that first book on Henry V. Without knowing it, she was planting the seed for her first novel, *Good King Harry*.

Kate: Mrs. Hoffman. Joyce Hoffman. I've always had a string of good English teachers. And this particular teacher opened her lunchroom every day to students who wanted to come in and instead of sitting in the cafeteria and talking about boys (laughs) or whatever - we would go in - There was a group of us, about ten, boys and girls, who would go in and talk about books!

And so, this was one that some of us read and talked about.

Kate: Once she was hooked, she used interlibrary loan to get other Henry biographies.

Denise: And for Christmas one year, my mother gave me a three-volume biography of Henry V! (laughs) That was my Christmas present! And I was thrilled - that's what I wanted. I asked for that.

Then, when I was in college, I also spent a semester in England doing an independent study project.

Kate: This is more than a passing interest. Did you feel a personal connection to him?

Denise: I did. The first time I heard about him, he sounded like somebody familiar. I almost felt like it was somebody I knew. And the more I read, the more familiar it sounded. I even had this experience, writing the book, that, I would be writing along and not sure where I would be going, and I would go ahead and push it forward. Then I would go back and try to look up some sources and see if I'd gotten it right. And I had!

And when I was writing the book, and when I got the section where he dies, I was writing the death scene, and I was working to finish, so I was working late into the night. And I finished, and I went back to check a fact and found out that I was actually writing this on the night that he actually died.

And that pretty much freaked me out! (laughs) I'm not Catholic - I'm Episcopalian - but I almost began to feel that I had been praying a person out of purgatory or something by writing that book. That sounds bizarre, I know. But that's what it felt like.

Kate: Well, we know very little about reality, especially about unseen reality.

Denise: Well, I'm pretty fascinated by unseen reality. One of my favorite quotations from literature is, "There is more in heaven and earth, Horatio, than is dreamt of in your philosophy." From *Hamlet*. And I believe that. And so I'm certainly open to anything that seems to come from beyond somehow.

14 Kate: Next we'll hear some lines from King Harry's deathbed scene. He's haunted by all the people who have died in his wars.

Denise: I detest coronations. England has seen two such spectacles in my lifetime. And it has been my misfortune to attend both. The first was my father's, the second my own. Soon the crow

been my misfortune to attend both. The first was my father's, the second my own. Soon the crown shall be set on the head of my young son. One compensation of my present condition is that I shall not have to suffer through it.

The King is God's servant, to work his will in the world, the King is England. Here then lies God's servant with the blood of thousands upon his hands.

It is no surprise that I have been brought to such a sorry state, for it is the lot of kings. We are akin to Judas, who betrayed our Lord. Someone had to do it, after all, just as someone must rule.

15 Denise: One of the things that I was trying to explore here was, a good man with power who's doing things with good motives. Or he thinks so. And yet people keep dying. And it seems like the more he tries to do, the more they die.

I was writing in the early eighties. And this was back when some of the groups like the Christian Coalition were getting started. And there was this idea that, if you can elect good Christians to office, then things'll change, and there'll be better leaders and rulers. And so I thought about that, and It struck me that there's just something about power and being in this kind of position that - with all the good will in the world - they're still going to mess up.

It's a very difficult spot to be in, I think. And it made me more sympathetic for people in these situations.

Kate: This book is set in the 15th century, but it keeps reminding me of the news today.

Denise: It's interesting. The world political situation at the time of *Good King Harry* is very much the same as now. An increasingly militant Islam which had taken over Constantinople and, within thirty years after Harry's death, would be at the gates of Vienna and threatening Europe. And he's conscious of that. That's the rationale that he's using for going to war is that there needs to emerge in Europe a strong leader who can stand in the way of that.

Kate: So Henry decides he's doing God's will by invading France.

Denise: Right. And the question becomes: Is he rationalizing? He convinces himself that France is so badly run, and it was. He convinces himself that what they need is someone who will bring peace. That the only way to stop all these blood-thirsty noblemen from ravaging the countryside and raping and killing peasants is if you have a strong king over them.

Kate: So then he leads a troop of Englishmen over to France and they rampage and ravage the countryside.

Denise: Right. He sets up these strict rules, trying to protect civilians. On his first campaign, it seemed to work fairly well. But when he went over again, he lost control, and they did the same things that the French were doing. And so more and more people were getting killed, and he begins to realize that he's really been fooling himself all along.

Kate: So this could be an allegory for any time in history. You can find out what happens if you read the book. But here a detail: an archer named Lloyd gets killed in Henry's French campaign.

Denise: I don't say it in the book, but he's an ancestor of the Lloyds in Storming Heaven and The Unquiet Earth.

Kate: I was going to ask you about that. I thought, there's that name again, the Lloyds.

Denise: Yeah, I usually try to have a little connection from one book to another. There's the Lloyds, in *Good King Harry* and in *The Unquiet Earth*, Tom is reading Dietrich Bonnhoeffer. I have little hints in each one of them that there's a connection with something else.

Kate: So let's follow one of those connections. While Denise wrote *Good King Harry*, she was planning *Storming Heaven*, a novel set in the Appalachian mountains. A main character in that novel, Rondall Lloyd, was the little boy watching his dad come in from the mines. He's also a direct descendent of the archer who got killed in Henry's campaign.

16 Rondall grows up to be a union organizer, and Carrie Bishop falls in love with him. She was that Kentucky farm girl wading in the river. He and Carrie go through the mine wars. But in this next scene, they're going to bed.

Denise: He put his arms around me, pulled me closer, and kissed me on the mouth. Then his mustache tickled my neck, and he slipped his hand inside my blouse. Every muscle in my body relaxed, and in one magical moment, I was on my back, and he was stretched full length on top of me. "No corset, thank God," he said. He smiled against my cheek.

I followed what he did, unbuttoned his shirt and ran my fingers through the hair of his chest. "I ain't sure what to do," I said.

"You're doing just fine," he said. "Do whatever you want to do."

"I don't want you to think I do this all the time, just with anybody."

"Honey, I know you better than that." He lifted my skirt, caressed my thigh. "You want me to stop?"

For a moment, Aunt Becka's face was close to mine, frowning in disapproval. I was astonished that this was happening so fast, but I was letting it happen. But then I tasted his mouth again, so sweet. "No, don't never stop." He tugged off my skirt, my blouse, pulled my shift over my head. Then he stood up, leaned against the sofa and awkwardly undressed. Together, we struggled to pull his pants over the cast on his foot. Then he lay back down beside me and slipped off my underpants.

I marveled at the smoothness of his skin, the smell of him, as though I'd never encountered a human being before. I clung to him with a fervor I had not known I possessed. "You are a hugger," he said, and I held on all the more tightly. He encircled my wrist with his finger and thumb. "So small." He guided my hand to his groin. The skin was softer than a baby's. I thought I must be the first to make such a discovery, that I had stumbled onto something precious.

I longed to cry out that I loved him, but the words would not come. We had not yet spoken of love. I knew a moment of pain, but it was fleeting, and I balanced on a great promentory. I scaled the heights to be touched by God and would never be the same again.

He was spent, his hair damp against my cheek. His heart fluttered wildly in his chest, like a bird trying to escape a cage. "I feel your heart beating," I said. He raised his head languidly, propped his head up on his elbows. "That's what you done to me."

"It was my first time," I said shyly.

"I never would have knowed it." I wasn't sure if that was a compliment. Then he kissed the tip of my nose. "I reckon you're just a natural."

Kate: Rondall conks out for the night, but Carrie can't sleep. (music starts) She's busy imagining them growing into old age together.

Denise: I lay sleepless throughout the night, my mind wandering from one scene to another. Here, we courted on the front steps of the homeplace. And my kin would take me aside and tell me what a fine man he was. There, we stood up before the preacher at our wedding. I saw Lloyd pace anxiously while he waited the birth of our first child. I saw him old, his hair and mustache turned to white, but his eyes still a lively blue.

Kate: She tells him she couldn't sleep for thinking of what had happened.

He buttoned his pants and looked up. "I don't want you to take this too serious," he said.

I felt as though a cold hand grasped my throat. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. I ain't the kind of man to fall in love with a woman. Don't know why. But that's the way it is."

Kate: Wasn't it hard not to make that scene come out right?

Denise: Not really. I wanted it to come out right, but I think this is more real. And this happens to women a lot. And uh you know, that's the kind of thing that women sit around and moan about to each other. That so-and-so! Most women have a story like that they can tell about somebody. And that's just the real world.

music

I thought it looked more like somethic clouds of black dust that settled over	>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>
>>>>>>>>	›>>>>

exhausted.

He talked the whole time I undressed and bathed him. "I knowed it would be all right, soon as I got inside. I felt easy, like they was nothing to fear. And guess what I seen, over by the haulage way? Mushrooms, growing up just as pretty as you please, there in the dark and the dust. I tell you, it was a sign from God. He was saying, "See here, how the least of these creatures can prosper in this place. And won't I take care of you?"

I filled his plate, put the fork in his hand. "Hit's a powerful noise when the powder blows. But when we cleared the coal out, I knelt there a minute and I thought, "They ain't never been a human being stood in this place before." It was like discovering a new part of God. Like being able to touch something precious. And to feel the mountain all around. To be closer to its heart than I ever did think was possible."

I sat across from him and toyed with my food. "And when I was picking slate, I come upon the outline of a fern that had growed right in the rock. You could count every leaf on it."

Kate: Carrie is wondering if he'll be allowed to preach in the mine.

Kate: And of course, those Bible study meetings also become, become union meetings.

[&]quot;You talk to the other men?"

[&]quot;We talked over our dinner pails. They was right shy about it. They were afeared of what the guards might think about meetings. So I said I'd speak to the Superintendent and get permission to study the Bible over dinner. They's some are interested in 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 Bonnhoeffer 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 Bonnhoeffer'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.

And I think actually, what they all come to conclude, and what I come to conclude is not just that it's impossible to be a king and not sin, but that it's impossible to be a human being without sinning. That's our condition. That's our human condition.

Kate: So I can see the thread through these books that, on the surface, seem to be very different.

21 Kate: Harry puts himself into the kingship, knowing that that will involve sinning. Bonnhoeffer puts himself into a plot to kill Hitler, knowing that will be sinning. Albion, who doesn't believe in violence, puts himself into the fight for the United Mine Workers, knowing that that will probably involve violence. All those people, struggling with their idea of their soul's damnation versus doing good on this earth.

Denise: Yeah, and some of them I think conclude that. And these are the people I admire I think who conclude that - the Huck Finn conclusion - if I'm going to hell for helping Jim escape, then I'll just go to hell. (laughs) And that's what they finally have to come up with.

Kate: Dietrich Bonnhoeffer makes one of those choices that he suspects will definitely send him to hell.

Denise: Bonhoeffer really had a chance to be safe. He actually had escaped to New York. And then decided, right before the outbreak of war, to go back.

Kate: And, as he's leaving, he's talking with his good friend, Bishop Bell.

"Only you can answer that," Bell said.

Dietrich nodded. "Then I have answered it. Only I would answer you one more question: What would you say to a man who fears he must sin? And sin to the point of endangering his own soul in order to help others?"

Bell was silent for a long time, then asked, "What sort of sin? Lying? Blasphemy? Betrayal? Killing? The denial of everything one has believed in? And the benefit to others?" Bell asked, then quickly added, "No, don't answer that. I know. I can think of no greater sacrifice for a man like you."

Denise: What Bonnhoeffer's talking about doing was going back and joining the German army, military intelligence, as a matter of fact, in the cause of Hitler and the invasion of Europe and the Holocaust and all that comes after. But of course, what he's seeing himself doing is trying to work from within to undermine the regime. But he knows his friends won't know that. And he also knows that he's going to have to do some things that are abhorrent to him. He's thought of

himself as a pacifist. And now he's joining military intelligence and going to be part of plots to kill a man that will also involve killing other people probably too, in the process.

Kate: No right answer.

Denise: I just think there are a lot of people out there, good people, who think it's easy to be good and right and make the right decisions all the time. I think there's a real shallowness to a lot of spiritual conservatism that I see out there, and because of the times we live in, it's carried over into politics as well. And so many people seem to have this idea that it's just easy to be good, to make good decisions. And I think actually, that's when people get hurt. That's when people get killed.

And so I'm trying to say it's not easy. And it's not just black and white. And that often the choices we have to make are not between good and bad, but between bad and bad. And there's just no other choice. And sometimes we make the choice for good and that turns out wrong. So I'm really trying to go against the spirit of the time in that sense.

22 Kate: Carrie Bishop's brother Miles faces with those same kinds of choices in *Storming Heaven*. A teacher sends Miles to college. Then he comes back home, takes a lower management job with a coal company and often has to make choices between bad and bad.

Denise: Miles is very much like Henry V, in that he's someone who finds himself in a situation of power that he didn't really expect to have and finds himself running with a crowd of powerful people that he didn't really expect to be with. And he's trying to figure out what to do with it, how to use it justly. And I think he gets lost much more quickly than Harry does. But he's trying to figure out how to help his people, trying to stay in the place where he's from. If he wants to use his education and be sort of a leader in the community, then he's got to be a leader with the coal industry.

Kate: Well, let's look at his dilemma. In this next scene, he's just come back from visiting the coal company owners in Massachusetts. He's hired Carrie as camp nurse. She's come to eat supper with him, and to confront him about a problem. He's telling her:

Denise: "They took me to their summer cottage in Maine. Cottage! It was bigger than this house. We had lobster. I ate my salad first, real slow, so I could watch how they got at that lobster and not let on like I was ignorant. It wasn't too hard to eat."

He had come back with his corn-colored hair parted in the middle and cut short like they wear in Boston. He looked very young. After dinner we went to sit by the fireplace, and he smoked a cigar he had brought back with him. "We had baked Alaska for dessert," he said.

"Well, while you was having baked Alaska, we was having typhoid."

[&]quot;What?"

"Typhoid. We had five cases while you were gone. Two died, and one is like to go any time. It's the season for it."

He sighed. "I reckon I got to come back down to earth, don't I?"

"I been looking around," I said. "The privies is built over the creek, and that's where most folks gets their water. With this many folks living cramped together, you got to build new privies, deep ones, and treat them with chemicals. That or bring water into the houses. If you don't, you'll keep right on getting typhoid.

Kate: Carrie insists that Miles write the owners and ask them to build new outhouses and provide sanitation. They write back and say no. And they say:

I was furious. "They built this here camp. They built the privies where they are. Anybody on Scary Creek will call you a fool if you build a privy next to your drinking water. Is that how they do things in Boston?"

"Don't be silly, Carrie."

"Don't call me silly. Who do them people think they are? And what are you going to do about it?"

"I've done all I can do," he said. "I took a risk bringing it up to them in the first place. They don't like to be bothered by details."

"And that's all you've got to say?"

"That's all I've got to say." He was my brother, so I said no more, tried to smother my anger. Two more typhoid cases died. I was silent. Each of us has our price, I thought bitterly. Miles has not walked behind a plow in six years. And he will do what he must to stay here. I have lost my mother and father. I have no husband and am not likely to ever have. And family means all the world to me. I'll not turn on my kin.

Denise: She's a mountain woman who could go the way Miles has, but really finds she can't.

Kate: She feels her call

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 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

25 Denise: This is from *The Unquiet Earth*. The person speaking is Dillon Freeman, who's a coal miner.

Kate: He's angry about a huge strip mine on the mountain above his house.

Denise: They are not just piles of rocks. They are ancient spirits. The old ones believed that way, my people used to say. And so do the Indians in this country.

I knew it myself when I worked in the mine. I could hear the mountain above me groan and cry out, mourning its losses, screaming with pain when we cut away its bones. I knew when the roof fell and took a man, it was no accident, but the mountain lashing out like a wounded animal.

I can hear the mountains talk at night. It is a gift I have from my great uncle Dillon, the hermit. I lie in my bed with the window open and hear the cries coming off Trace. I have seen what they are doing above Lloyd's Fork. Once where all the television sets in Number 13 went blank, Hassel and I drove up to see what had happened to the antenna. Bears probably knocked it over, Hassel said. I smiled at his foolishness.

Kate: And when they get up to the antenna, they see that the strip mine has gone far beyond what the permit would allow.

26 Kate: And in this next scene, the inadequate dam that same company built at the head of the holler breaks and sends millions of tons of coal waste water pounding down the holler - just like the actual dam break in Buffalo Creek holler. One of the main characters, a Jesuit priest is trying to warn people when he sees the flood coming.

Denise: Low water surges ahead of the moving wall and covers the road and the railroad track, laps at the foot of the hillside. Then the wall passes, the sound so loud, I cannot think. My arms are wrapped around a tree, and I hold it in a death grip, though I am above the water that moves so fast, I am dizzy, and I turn away, for my feet want to go from under me, it moves so fast. I see the church. It is only part of a church, a steeple and roof. The current pushes it toward me. A tiny figure clings to the steeple. The roof hits the mountainside, and the child holding onto the steeple reaches an arm to me and screams. Then the water has the roof again and wrenches it away from the bank, back out into the current. I leap into the water. Cold. I grab the roof, pull myself up. He is soaking wet and coated with black muck. I pry him from the steeple, and his arms grip my neck. Hard to breathe. We are moving, whirling, and I am dizzy. The waves wash over us, and my grip loosens. The boy screams.

A trailer tumbling end over end. We rush toward it, and it raises up to crush us. I let go of the roof, and we are free in the water. I go under, up, and the boy screams. Wood is all around. It

hits me. Stunning. I grab a tire. We ride fast. A shelf smashes against the side of my head. I go under.

Wider. The sky is wider. The water slows. I go under. The water slows.

The mountain grabs me and lifts me. I hold the boy tight. It is not the boy. The boy? It is not the boy. It sticks in my chest. Wood. Hold it tight. Cold.

Denise: Oh, those are hard to read. That scene, it's one of the hardest things I've written. I wrote it all in a rush, I didn't really stop. Actually I think it's maybe the only thing I never really edited. I just tried to put it out there and not even touch it afterwards. I did go back and look at it, but I just decided not to mess with it.

Kate: Wasn't it scary to put yourself there?

Denise: It's always hard to write those scenes, the really dramatic scenes I've written, where people die. It's hard 'cause you have to kind of live it yourself with your characters. And usually, it comes toward the end of a book too. By that time, you've gotten to know the characters really well, and you care about them, and you don't want to see them go through stuff like this. So it's very hard to write, those kinds of things.

Kate: How do you work yourself up to it?

Denise: I just block out the world, really. I don't sit down to write a scene like that unless I have a chunk of time where I can just not be interrupted.

Same thing happened with *Saints and Villains*. I wrote probably the last 25 pages, all in a 24-hour period. just going through it. For something that intense, you have to do that, to keep the intensity yourself. So it's kind of a strategy.

music

27 Kate: Denise Giardina's fifth novel, *Fallon's Secret*, combines it all: Medieval England, present-day Appalachia, serious choices, and lots of humor!

Denise: It's a time-travel book.

Kate: This is a West Virginia woman who goes back in time and falls in love with...

Denise: Yeah. She falls in love with a guy from the seventeenth century. Sure! (laughs) He's politically active. She's a contemporary woman. And they have some clashes about that, because he obviously has never heard of feminism. And so she has to teach him a few things. But it's kind of fun. It's really fun.

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'a 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.

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