

The Oklahoma Experience: Re-Visions

America is the land of the second chance; one can always start over, somewhere else. That's our belief, even after the disappearance of the frontier. As one of the last states to join the Union, Oklahoma has many stories of new beginnings. It was the territory forced on some, a newly opened land others rushed to secure, and, later, a scorched or unproductive home that many were forced to leave. After the outflow of the Great Depression, even those who stayed had to start over, to re-establish themselves. Both groups--and their children--hopefully remember enough to acknowledge, unashamed, that their struggles here significantly shaped their lives.

The four novels and memoir in this series re-envision the past from the perspectives of the late 20th century. Two deal with the experiences of Native Americans before statehood, although part of Howe's novel is set in the late 20th century. Askew and Dunbar-Ortiz center their narratives in the 1920s and 1940s. In her second novel, Letts returns to a Sequoyah affected by the malaise after Vietnam. Clearly, the past is not a closed book for these authors. All the narratives show people shaping their own lives within the historical moment, even when they are caught up in events that are beyond them.

One is struck by the diversity of these narratives, dramatizing regional and cultural differences within the state. Historians relate that topographic differences between eastern piedmont/prairie and western plains created very different agricultural economies in the state. Likewise, both the dates and the ethnic composition of migrant waves enriched Oklahoma with very different cultures. Glancy and Howe focus on two important tribes, the Cherokee and Choctaw, which have strong matrilineal elements. Askew dramatizes the connections, compromises and collisions among whites, Native Americans, and Afro-Americans in a 15-year period after statehood, leading up to the Tulsa race riot. Through an account of her own life, Dunbar-Ortiz explores the social psychology of the poor whites who became the "Okies" of the Thirties and Forties.

One question that arises is whether so many groups, taken together, created a common "Oklahoma experience." Early census figures support the case for regionalizing the state into Midwestern and Southern cultures, with a central portion of intermingled "Oklahoman" culture. Among the books in this series, it makes a difference whether the narrative centers on the Cherokees' traveling to Oklahoma (Glancy), the Choctaw community of Old Durant (Howe), or homes in black and white communities of Tulsa (Askew). Billie Letts' fictional Sequoyah certainly provides more community support

than Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz' Piedmont, where a dysfunctional family is essentially on its own.

But we find an essential commonality: featured are people who confront challenges that define who they are and what they will become. While all of the stories are set in Oklahoma, the racial prejudice, the poverty, the town or urban environments, the violence, and even the extremes of weather could have occurred elsewhere. Perhaps these novels mark a maturation of Oklahoma literature, a merging of the state's distinctive experiences with mainstream narrative themes. No longer does the state itself seem so much under the microscope, as a place set apart by Indian settlement, land rushes, and the Dust Bowl, although the legacy of these elements is clearly present.

Pushing the Bear disperses its story of the Trail of Tears through many voices, enacting the multiple perspectives of those who live through a major historical trauma. A young wife in Rilla Askew's *Fire in Beulah*, left alone by her husband, is drawn into dangerous relationships with her brother and her maid, in the context of racial tensions that explode in Tulsa. In her memoir of "Growing Up Okie," the author of *Red Dirt* is both Roxie Dunbar and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. The child directly feels her poverty and social constrictions of a small town; the adult author, now living in California, struggles to come to terms with her origins, even as she analyzes them. *Shell Shaker* daringly parallels events from the 18th century with the present day, centering on the women of one family within the Choctaw community. In fulfilling their roles as peacemakers, they suggest what older traditions can offer in the process of healing. *The Honk and Holler Opening Soon* takes its name from a small café where the town's character is shaped.

Pushing the Bear
by Diane Glancy

In an author's note, Diane Glancy tells of attending a performance of *The Trail of Tears* in Tahlequah in the late 1970s. She later traveled along the route that thirteen thousand Cherokee followed in 1838 after being forced to abandon their farms in several Southeastern states. These encounters with her father's heritage set Glancy on an eighteen-year process of researching and writing this novel.

The sight of an old Cherokee pot, partially reconstructed from fragments, suggested a structure for the novel. How else to tell the story than through the imagined voices and real documents of some who marched? The march proceeds, state by state, from North Carolina to the Indian Territory, with maps to indicate the way taken. While a large number of characters speak, the narrative centers on one North Carolina couple, Maritole and Knobowtee, and their families. Through the wife, we are drawn into both the weaknesses and the resources of strength that hardship and deprivation can

stimulate. Through Knobowtee, we learn much about the political history, the trail of broken treaties and agreements that led to this awful journey. The bear being "pushed" is a force which resists and even kills the travelers. At the same time, some of them survive by becoming more like the solitary bear.

As they trudge toward the Indian Territory, beset by cold and sickness, the Cherokee debate whether they should or could have done something else at some point and why they suffer so unjustly. Such questions, along with anxieties about the future, stimulate a dialogue setting white man's Christian-based answers and self-serving actions against the Cherokees' own traditional stories and beliefs.

Fire in Beulah
by Rilla Askew

Rilla Askew began her first novel, *The Mercy Seat*, with a meditation on Oklahoma: "Its name first in English was Indian Territory, and then, for a short time, it was called two territories, Indian and Oklahoma--meaning both the same thing, a redundancy--and then, again, it is one. The land took and held its Indian name, its Choctaw name, oklahoma, meaning 'red people,' as the whole of the continent, changing, would hold her place names, her mountains and rivers, in the tongues that first named them. The shape of it, drawn in mythical lines by men who collaborate in illusion, is that of a saucepan, or hatchet. It lies not in the heart but in the belly, the very gut of the nation..." (2).

While that novel follows the journey of two families to the Indian Territory in 1887, *Fire in Beulah* narrates another story of the "belly," when the displacements and speculations of the original land boom were echoed by racial conflict and thinly regulated oil exploitation in the 1920s. In a brief period of time, the state recapitulated two great national excesses: the first large race riot in Detroit and the earlier gold rushes in the West. As in her first novel, Askew features two families: Althea Whiteside Dedemeyer and her husband, an oil entrepreneur, and Graceful Whiteside, her black maid, whose family lives in the doomed Greenwood section of Tulsa. Each woman has a fugitive brother who involves her in the turmoil leading to the burning and bloodshed of May 31, 1921.

Askew credits a number of studies of the Tulsa Riot that emerged in the late 1990s, coincident with the approach of its 80th anniversary, the unearthing of a mass grave, and a state-sponsored investigation of what happened to determine liability. Oil fever, lynch fever, and the great gulf between the black and white communities of Tulsa all contribute to the passions and misunderstandings that sweep all the major characters into the climactic destruction of that night in May.

Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie

by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

One of the more interesting chapters in *Red Dirt* reflects on the kind of people who pushed their way to the frontier, those who stubbornly fought the elements and other humans to make a place for themselves. These Scots-Irish, the author's ancestors, were also among those who hung on, clinging to their marginal farms and town occupations rather than migrating West during the Depression. Not that their situation was much better than those who hit the road. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz identifies herself as an "Okie" in both senses, growing up among those who stayed and later joining those who settled in California.

If *Fire in Beulah* dramatizes the human toll of living in the midst of oil and racial fevers in the 1920s, *Red Dirt* records and analyzes the effects of growing up dirt poor in Piedmont, Oklahoma, during World War II and afterward. A powerful mother, frustrated in her ambitions, drives too fast and turns to alcohol; the child's asthma condition requires extraordinary care and causes reactive abuse from her mother; a very limited small town is near enough to Oklahoma City for the teen to become painfully aware of her lower economic and social status during the flush years of the 1950s--all these factors lead the young Roxie Dunbar to wonder whether she will ever have a "normal life." However, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, as author, remembers the support she got from her brothers, the sister's home that was a refuge, the Scout activities led by her mother, the girl and boy friends, all of which helped her develop into a sensitive social historian, committed to rendering her people accurately and sympathetically.

The author returns to a childhood and a place she had tried to forget. Her long-delayed visit to family gravesites and to those relatives and friends left in Oklahoma, her investigation into the radical grandfather she had once been too fearful to acknowledge, and her production of this autobiography all show that journeys can sometimes culminate where they began.

Shell Shaker

by LeAnne Howe

Toward the end of *Pushing the Bear*, one character reflects that the women of the Cherokee, in their "behind-the-scenes" way, would probably assign the new lands and enforce the laws in the Territory. The Choctaw, another tribe displaced from the Southeast, have a strong tradition of women participating in important decisions. LeAnne Howe, an enrolled Choctaw, focuses her novel on a family of women, peacemakers, and visionaries known as shell shakers.

The novel weaves stories of two generations of the Bili or Billy women: the Bili are involved in conflicts taking place within a culture newly entangled with different white interests (English versus French) in 1738; in the 1990s, the Billys become embroiled in intratribal conflict over the use of profits generated by very successful casino operations, a conflict complicated by secret agreements with white interests. The first group must work within and sometimes violate the traditional limitations of custom; the second group, dispersed in modern white culture, must relearn traditional ways even while building a case that will hold up in a modern courtroom. Old and new means of negotiation, resolution, and passage into adulthood or death are set side by side. In addition, both generations of women must work out their moral and visionary imperatives in a culture led by strong males. Both learn that the process of healing often involves violence or loss, as well as peacemaking.

Pushing the Bear raises the question of what displacement and a traumatic journey will do to family and tribal groups. Shell Shaker explores whether a family and a people, who underwent a similar historical process of displacement and who have since accommodated to modern culture, can unify by recapturing some of their old traditions.

The Honk and Holler Opening Soon

by Billie Letts

Honk and Holler returns Billie Letts' readers to the mythical town of Sequoyah, Oklahoma, where Novalee Nation presumably still lives (or will live) after putting her life together in *Where the Heart Is*. In this novel, the focus is on different characters whose lives intersect in 1985. The immediate setting is a café, "The Honk and Holler Opening Soon." Its name too enthusiastically committed to neon twelve years earlier. Caney, the owner, and Molly-O, his waitress, shape their lives around their customers, in part to erase their own painful pasts. Caney, a paraplegic Vietnam vet, has not been outside the café since it opened.

Things change, however, when Vena Takes Horse and Bui Khanh arrive in town and manage to talk their way into working for Caney. These refugees from the road inject new energy into the café and enlarge the lives of Caney and Molly-O. In a sense, the novel explores the extent to which a small diner can embody the spirit of a town, and the extent to which community can heal the lives of those who live there.

At one point, Vena realizes how much she has grown accustomed to the folks that come into the café: "[she]... watched the way Soldier hooked his thumb over the rim of his coffee cup when he raised it to his mouth and how Hooks squinted when he chewed on a toothpick... watched the way Bilbo tilted his head to blow his smoke away from Peg's bluish face and how Wanda Sue pulled at her ear when she passed her latest gossip...

watched the way Bui bowed shyly to compliments and how Life looked at Molly-O like a puppy waiting to be petted". For all of the drama of discovery and change in the main characters' lives, they find direction within a network of familiar relationships in a place called Sequoyah. For the reader, what may really matter at the end of the Letts' novel is that such a place seems possible.

For Further Reading

- Askew, Rilla. *The Mercy Seat*. New York: Viking Press, 1997.
- Askew, Rilla. *Strange Business*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.
- Beesley, Stanley W. *Sweetwater, Oklahoma*. Philadelphia: Xlibris Corp., 2000.
- Brophy, Alfred L. and Randall Kennedy. *Reconstructing the Dreamland: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Fisher, Ada Lois Sipuel. *Matter of Black and White: The Autobiography of Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996.
- Glancy, Diane. *Flutie*. Wakefield, Rhode Island: Moyer Bell, 1998.
- Glancy, Diane. *The Mask Maker: A Novel*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002.
- Gregory, James N. *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Hollingsworth, A. B. *Flatbellies*. Chelsea, Michigan: Sleeping Bear Press, 2001.
- Joyce, Davis, ed. *An Oklahoma I Had Never Seen Before: Alternative Views of Oklahoma History*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996.
- Kingsolver, Barbara. *Pigs in Heaven*. New York: Harper, 1993.
- Letts, Billie. *Where the Heart Is*. New York: Warner Books, 1995.
- Letts, Billie, Molly L. Griffis, Molly Griffis. *You've Got Mail, Billie Letts*. Austin, Texas: Eakin Publications, 1999.
- Madigan, Tim. *The Burning: Massacre, Destruction, and the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001.
- Miller, Worth Robert. *Oklahoma Populism: A History of the People's Party in the Oklahoma Territory*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987.
- Mitchell, William. *My Life Before the Fire*. Shawnee, Oklahoma: Voices of the Advent Pub., 1998.
- Momaday, N. Scott. *The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories Passages*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.
- Morgan, Dan. *Rising in the West: The True Story of an "Okie" Family in Search of the American Dream*. New York: Random House, 1992.
- Morgan, Howard Wayne and Anne Hodges Morgan. *Oklahoma: A Bicentennial History*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1977.
- Morgan, Speer. *The Freshour Cylinders*. Denver: MacMurray and Beck Fiction, 1998.
- Morgan, Speer. *The Whipping Boy*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1994.
- Morrison, Toni. *Paradise*. New York: Plume, 1999.

Roark, Michael. "Searching for Hearth: Culture Areas of Oklahoma," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* LXX, 4 (Winter 1992-93).

Shindo, Charles. *Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997.

Speer, Jess Willard and Bonnie Speer. *Hillback to Boggy*. Norman, Oklahoma: Reliance Press, 1991.

Stein, Howard F. and Robert F. Hill, editors, *The Culture of Oklahoma*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993.

Strickland, Rennard. *The Indians in Oklahoma*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

Tharp, Tim. *Falling Dark*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2001.

Worster, Donald. *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

For Viewing

Far and Away (1992)

The Trail of Tears (annual summer drama presented in Tahlequah)

Where the Heart Is (1990)

The Oklahoma Experience: Re-Visions was developed by Dr. William Hagen, retired professor of English at Oklahoma Baptist University, and Dr. Jennifer Kidney. Development of this theme was made possible by funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities.



is a project of

