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# Setting as character

## Rilla Askew’s new collection of essays takes a hard look at home

BY NATHAN KNAPP



**“On some level I’m always writing to Oklahoma,” Rilla Askew said to me over the phone. “Who I’m thinking of is the people I come from ... I’m always looking to show us to us.”**

As Askew puts it in the opening essay of “Most American: Notes From a Wounded Place,” published in June this year by University of Oklahoma Press: “These regions don’t claim us, although Oklahoma borders and reflects all of them. It’s as if each region shrugs and says to itself, ‘No, it’s no part of us; it must belong to them over there.”

In the book’s nine essays, Askew takes on the subject of what Oklahoma is, what it has been,

**Rilla Askew will speak at Booksmart Tulsa at downtown's Central Library on July 10, 7pm.**

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what it could be—and her love of Oklahoma bears the mark of its complicated background.

She writes:

Oklahomans reflect the whole of the American paradox: our selflessness and keen self-absorption, our conservatism and revolutionary impulses, our modernity and deep ingrainedness in the past. We are a generous people, compassionate, self-sacrificing, capable of great heroism, decent. Violent. Filled with prejudice. Profoundly and pridefully independent. Sentimental.

Although the overriding theme has to do with place, specifically this place, the book also functions as a memoir-in-essays, detailing Askew's childhood in Bartlesville, a summer in her late-teens in Tahlequah, and her time in Tulsa before she left for New York to pursue acting. The book also tells the story of her return to Oklahoma, where she lived for a time in the wild, rattlesnake-infested Sans Bois Mountains near McAlester. Askew now splits time between Norman, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Oklahoma, and her home in the Catskill Mountains in upstate New York.

The book is about how we deal with loss, and love, and it's also, repeatedly, about awakening to things. Nearly all of the essays turn on some awakening of Askew's—some kind of new profound knowledge or epiphany—that occasionally feel too easily earned.

This is exacerbated by the fact that most of the essays reference or quote—some repeatedly—from Askew's previous novels and other writing. It's not wrong to reference one's own work, but the casual, repetitive way in which these essays reference her writerly past lends some of them the tone of an acceptance speech.

Still, such a talented writer with such a powerfully instinctive grasp on what Oklahoma is, in all its contradictions, is hard to come by.

Her sense of place, though a major part of what is best in this book, is not the only richness present here. Askew is at her best when she sets her own inner psychology aside and tells a story, like her retelling of the tornado that destroyed the little town of Boggy in 1945, her straightforward account of the senseless 2013 beating of her god-son's stepfather at the hands of Brooklyn police. It's her knack for intuitive storytelling that seems most Oklahoman of all.

She's profoundly optimistic, but also aware of the state's darker side, like the Tulsa race massacre and Oklahoma's part in the genocide, displacement, and removal of Native American peoples from their lands. She doesn't pull punches when it comes to talking about how fucked up this place can be, has been.

"What keeps you coming back here?" I asked.

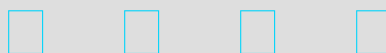
"I think it's the ineffable pull of home," she said.

For more from Nathan, read his article on [four-packs of Okie beer](#).

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