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Award-winning author explores the complexity of Oklahoma in 'Most American'

BOOKS • Rilla Askew’s latest book is a collection of essays that recalls the good, bad of Oklahoma

By James D. Watts Jr. Tulsa World Jul 9, 2017 Updated Jul 9, 2017 0



Book Event

"Getting Personal with Rilla Askew," presented by Tulsa City-County Library, Booksmart Tulsa and Magic City Books.

When: 7 p.m. Monday July 10.

Where: Pocahontas Greadington Learning & Creativity Center, Central Library, Fourth Street and Denver Avenue.

Admission: Free.



Perhaps the best way to understand something as vast and multifaceted as the United States of America is to look closely at Oklahoma.

"This state has always seemed to me to be a microcosm of the country as a whole," said Rilla Askew, whose latest book is a collection of essays that takes an unflinching look at her home state and its people. "And I think, in some ways, that's why Oklahoma is something of a mystery to the rest of the country.

"If people on the coasts know anything about Oklahoma, it's usually some kind of stereotype," she said. "But what I've experienced in the rest of the world is that people have no idea of who, or what, or where we are."

"Most American: Notes from a Wounded Place" (University of Oklahoma Press, \$19.95) brings together nine nonfiction pieces that Askew has written over the past decade.

Askew is best-known for her award-winning novels, all of which have dealt with difficult aspects of Oklahoma and American culture, such as "Fire in Beulah," set during the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot; "Harpsong," about a young couple forced to live on the road during the Great Depression; and "Kind of Kin," which explored issues of family and illegal immigration.

“I’m fundamentally a novelist, so my natural impulse when writing is to make things up,” Askew said. “That was one reason why writing the pieces in this book were so very challenging for me.

“But perhaps the most difficult thing was the vulnerability you feel when you are confronting these truths about yourself,” she said.

“You have to face these attitudes that you were raised with, the half-truths and the misconceptions, and own them. And then you have to tame all the layers and complexities and coincidences in your life into a narrative, and try to avoid the impulse of turning everything into a neatly composed ‘story.’ ”



The essays in “Most American” also serve as a form of memoir, with each individual piece highlighting moments in Askew’s life when she was confronted with truths about her home and herself that range from the surprising to the sobering, from embarrassment to despair.

Askew’s essays also are a kind of memoir, tracing her own growing awareness of the many sides — both positive and negative — of Oklahoma history and how she has dealt with issues of race and identity, faith and violence, the beauty of the land and the appalling weather that transforms it.

In the title piece, Askew writes: “Paradox and dichotomy dominate Oklahoma’s character, and this is part of what accounts for our mystery, for why we cannot be classified or categorized. Paradox doesn’t lend itself readily to sound bites or to easy history lessons ... If one tries to capture who we are simplistically, with a single cohesive viewpoint, looking only at what is best in us, the effort is doomed to failure.”

“The issues in this book — in all of my books — are ones that I know will never be laid to rest,” Askew said. “These ideas about race and place, and how they have shaped me and everyone else, are truly a life’s work. They are things I know I’m going to be wrestling with forever.

“As will Oklahoma,” she said. “We’re all still trying to know and understand who we are. I love Oklahoma and Oklahomans so much, and yet there are so many aspects of us that can be mortifying to see still exist.”

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Scene Writer James D. Watts Jr.

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