



## PEOPLE

# Patron Saint of Libraries

Philanthropist Peggy Helmerich keeps a whirlwind pace at age 90, decades after leaving Hollywood as a movie starlet.

**H**er calendar brims with appointments and get-togethers.

Her slim build and vibrant facial features defy time and make you recall her films from the early 1950s.

And she could easily have the title of patron saint of Oklahoma libraries.

At 90, Tulsa philanthropist Peggy Dow Helmerich sets a fast pace. She squeezes in three workouts a week at a small gym into a schedule packed with board meetings and time with her dozen great-grandchildren.

"Oh, I don't think I have a lot of energy," she says modestly. "But if I keep the exercise going, that really helps."

Helmerich has reached a point in life where social conventions can slack off a bit.

"Until you get to be 90, you kind of hide your age if you're a woman," she says. "But after that, you don't care."

As namesake of the Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award, she and the Tulsa Library Trust have brought 33 literary giants (counting this month's recipient, Hilary Mantel) to Oklahoma. They have included poets such as Billy Collins, novelists such as John Updike and playwrights such as Neil Simon.

"These are the most important authors of our generation coming to Tulsa," Helmerich says. "They're coming to see what we're like. John le Carre came [in 1990] and people in New York couldn't believe it."

In addition to her longtime

support of the Tulsa City-County Library system (the branch on East 91st Street is named for her), Helmerich has also helped to finance libraries at the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University, as well as drama programs at OU and Northwestern University (which she attended).

The nearly half-century association with the Tulsa library began reluctantly.

"Robert LaFortune was mayor and lived next door and he wanted me to be on the library board. I didn't want to at first, but he knew enough about my doggone boys, so I agreed," Helmerich says with a laugh. "And it was wonderful. I was stunned at how big the library system is."

However, she came home overwhelmed after the first meeting and told her husband, oilman Walter Helmerich III, about doubting what she could do to help.

"Walt suggested taking the library's small trust and expanding it," she says. "We used our connections through the years to increase the trust [because] libraries are a treasure house of information and technology."

"The library is the headquarters for the public. People look for

jobs at the library. Librarians and aides advise where people can go for social services."

The Helmerichs were married for 60 years before his death in 2012. She went from Hollywood starlet – best known as Nurse Kelly in 1950's *Harvey* with Jimmy Stewart, and Judy Greene in 1951's *Bright Victory* with Arthur Kennedy and Rock Hudson – to young bride in the rolling greenery of Tulsa. They had their sons (Hans, Rik, Mat, Zak and Jon) and she got involved with the community.

However, Helmerich is quick to diminish her role in the family's substantial philanthropy to scores of nonprofits and organizations in Tulsa and the state.

"My husband did all the funding; he just did stuff in my name, so I got the credit," she says. "He gave quite a bit to the [Tulsa] ballet, opera and symphony and both museums [Philbrook and Gilcrease] – the arts in general – because they all give us quality of life."

Helmerich has zero regrets about leaving Hollywood.

"I could see the writing on the wall," she says of increasingly sordid expectations of actresses. "I saw it starting to change for the worse. The whole Harvey Weinstein type of thing has been going on for years."

"I had achieved what I wanted to do in Hollywood and I didn't want that to happen to me. I wanted to be married and have children. Not many people stay married in Hollywood. I'd had enough of it, so I decided to leave."

Helmerich also has no qualms about age and mortality.

"We are at the end – of our lives, of our work," she says. "We don't want to be sad about it. It's marvelous to experience that much life. I've tasted so many parts of life."

■ BRIAN WILSON



## HILARY MANTEL RECEIVES HELMERICH AWARD

Nearly 5,000 miles away sits a master storyteller painstakingly shaping the details of her country's history into a page-turner to enlighten and delight millions of fans around the world.

Dame Hilary Mantel, England's two-time Man Booker Prize-winning historical novelist, has worked for two years to complete *The Mirror and the Light*, the final installment in her internationally renowned, best-selling *Wolf Hall* trilogy about the rise of Thomas Cromwell in the court of King Henry VIII. She aims to publish it in fall 2019.

"It's a huge and complex book, covering the time between the execution of Anne Boleyn in 1536 and Thomas Cromwell's own death in 1540," says Mantel, coming in December to receive the Tulsa Library Trust's 2018 Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award. "It's not the story of his fall, as people sometimes assume. He has a long way to rise in the world before everything goes wrong after Henry VIII's fourth marriage."

"Like the first two books, it demands ... attention from an open-minded reader, but it gives a lot, too, in terms of political and psychological drama. It's not the story you expect."

Like its predecessors, *The Mirror and the Light* looks behind the scenes at one of the most volatile periods of English history with a story that is "bigger than time and place – about sex and love and power, about ambition and risk, success and failure when the stakes are high," Mantel says.

– Jackie Hill

FOR EXTENDED INTERVIEWS WITH HELMERICH AND MANTEL, VISIT [OKMAG.COM/WEB](http://OKMAG.COM/WEB).

### PEGGY V. HELMERICH DISTINGUISHED AUTHOR AWARD

**Award Presentation/Black-Tie Gala**  
6:30 p.m. Dec. 7  
Central Library, Fifth Street  
and Denver Avenue

**Free Public Presentation**  
10:30 a.m. Dec. 8  
Central Library

For more information or to buy tickets to the dinner, visit [helmerichaward.org](http://helmerichaward.org) or call 918-549-7323.