

Celebrating Oklahoma Women Writers

Prepared by the Oklahoma Department of Libraries for the American Women Writers National Museum

"For in Oklahoma all the experiences that went into the making of the nation have been speeded up. Here all the American traits have been intensified. The one who can interpret Oklahoma can grasp the meaning of America in the modern world."

—Angie Debo, *Oklahoma: Footloose and Fancy Free*, 1949



Angie Debo

Every one of these United States touts its unique place in the American Story, but few have as curious a history as Oklahoma. Its place on the continent would have predicted statehood much sooner than 1907, when Oklahoma became the 46th Star. But the federal Indian Removal Act of 1830 and the establishment of an Indian Territory would put the land on a different path, diverging from the logical progression of the white man's Manifest Destiny.

The relocated tribes were promised their new land "as long as the waters run" by U.S. treaty. The tribes would find the promise broken in the latter years of the nineteenth century when Indian Territory saw the breakup of reservations, and then in the early twentieth century when the collective tribes were denied a state of their own. Instead, the territory would join with Oklahoma Territory to form the new state.

When areas of the territories were opened for settlement through land runs and lotteries, African Americans came to fulfill the promise of equality, only to see the promise shattered with the establishment of Jim Crow laws.

Even the "promised land" promoted during the runs and lotteries would ultimately lead to broken dreams for many Euro-Americans, who would see desperate hardship in the depression, drought, and farm crisis of the 1930s.

Promises made and broken—the difference between the life we wanted and the life we have—resonate in the stories of Oklahoma's women writers.

We celebrate the promise of a better life for African Americans when we read the Joyce Carol Thomas children's book *I Have Heard of a Land*, and we cry when that promise is broken in Rilla Askew's *Fire in Beulah*, a story of the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 and the destruction of America's Black Wall Street.



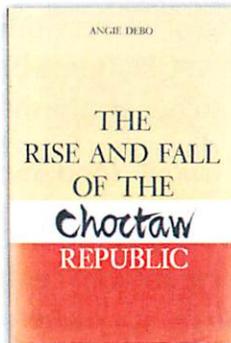
We struggle with the Cherokees along the devastating Trail of Tears in Diane Glancy's *Pushing the Bear*, and then marvel at the strength of an unconquerable Choctaw spirit in LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker*, a novel set in both pre-removal days and modern day Durant, Oklahoma. Oklahoma is also a story of strength and perseverance. Hope springs eternal, and no more so than in the novels of Billie Letts, where her lost protagonists—like Novalee Nation in *Where the Heart Is*— must often depend on the kindness of Oklahoma strangers as they search for a home, a family—a place to belong.

The Pioneers

The first Oklahoma women who found success in the literary world were historians and scholars who studied the state and the diverse people who came to call it home. In the process they left a body of work that continues to inspire modern readers and researchers who seek to understand the American experience.

Angie Debo (1890–1988)

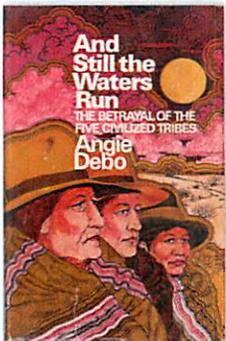
“The First Lady of Oklahoma History” arrived in Oklahoma Territory in a covered wagon when she was nine years old. Her prize-winning dissertation, published as *The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic*, was the first of 13 books and hundreds of articles on Native American and Oklahoma history. *And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes* was a ground-breaking and controversial work detailing the systematic theft of Indian



lands. Her portrait was placed in the Oklahoma State Capitol Rotunda in 1988.

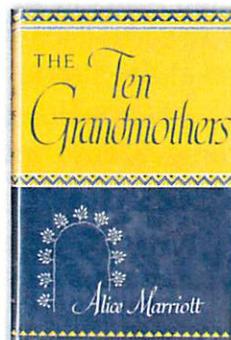
Other selected works—*Oklahoma: Footloose and Fancy Free* ☉ *Prairie City* ☉ *A History of the Indians of the United States* ☉ *Geronimo: The Man, His Time, His Place*

On film—PBS’s *American Experience: Indians, Outlaws, and Angie Debo*



Alice Marriott (1910–1992)

Marriott was the first woman to receive a degree in the anthropological field at the University of Oklahoma. She dedicated her career to the study of the American Indian and the role of Indian women. Marriott’s first book, *The Ten Grandmothers: Epic of the Kiowas*, was released to critical acclaim. In 1963, the *Christian Science Monitor* said she “has probably done more than any other woman to contribute to the understanding of the American Indian....”



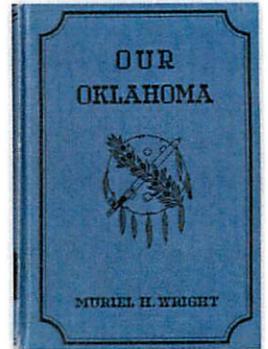
Other selected works—*Maria: The Potter of San Ildefonso* ☉ *Sequoyah: Leader of the Cherokees* ☉ *Hell on Horses and Women*

Muriel Wright (1889–1975)

A writer, teacher, and historian, Wright traced her descent from passengers aboard the Mayflower in 1620 as well as the Choctaw Nation. (Her grandfather, Choctaw Chief Allen Wright, suggested the name “Oklahoma” for the territory.) With Joseph P. Thoburn she produced the four volume *Oklahoma: A History of the State and Its People*.

Her *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of Oklahoma* remains a standard reference for studying the state’s tribes. From 1923 to 1971, she produced dozens of articles for *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* journal.

Recommended reading on “The Pioneers”—*Hidden Treasures of the American West: Muriel H. Wright, Angie Debo, and Alice Marriott* by Patricia Loughlin



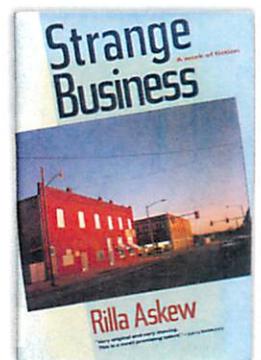
The Contemporaries

Today’s Oklahoma women writers mine both the rich history of the state and its people, as well as contemporary culture and times for their work.

Rilla Askew

A fifth-generation Oklahoman from the San Bois Mountains, award-winning author Askew says, “America is my subject. Oklahoma the canvas.” Like historian Debo, Askew sees the state as a “microcosm of all that’s taken place on the North American continent for the past five hundred years—turned inside out, foreshortened, intensified.” She received a 2009 Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the 2011 Arrell Gibson Lifetime Achievement Award from the Oklahoma Center for the Book.

Works—*Strange Business* ☉ *The Mercy Seat* ☉ *Fire in Beulah* ☉ *Harpsong* ☉ *Kind of Kin*



Diane Glancy

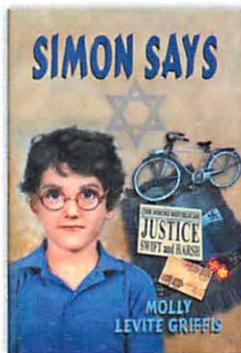
A number of states could make claim to poet, author and playwright Glancy, but her family's roots go deep in Oklahoma. Of Cherokee and German descent, the multi-award winner says she works in the "in-between: between genres, identities, and systems of belief." True to her in-between creative life, she has recently become a filmmaker, having written and directed the movie *The Dome of Heaven*, based on her novel *Flutie*.



Selected works—*Pushing the Bear* ☼ *The Mask Maker* ☼ *Designs of the Night Sky* ☼ *Stone Heart: A Novel of Sacajawea*

Molly Griffis

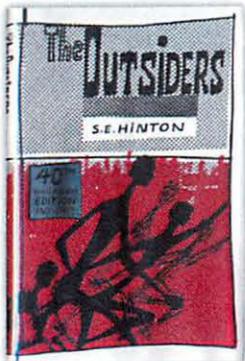
Children's author Griffis places her young protagonists in historical settings so young people can experience an Oklahoma from a different time. In *Paradise on the Prairie*, two young boys board the Orphan Train for the Territories, while her Apache trilogy takes place in an Oklahoma high school during World War II. The trilogy picked up two Oklahoma Book Awards.



Selected works—*The Rachel Resistance* ☼ *The Feester Filibuster* ☼ *Simon Says* ☼ *The Great American Bunion Derby* ☼ *Once in a Blue Moon*

S.E. Hinton

Hinton was only 18 years of age when her novel *The Outsiders* was published in 1967. Inspired by the conflict between social groups in her Tulsa high school, the book won numerous awards and was on the leading edge of a trend that would change the face of young adult literature in America. She would write four more YA novels, many of them turned into popular movies, and all making ALA's Best Books for Young Adults list. In recent years she has written for adults and children.



Other selected works—*Rumble Fish* ☼ *Tex* ☼ *The Star Runner* ☼ *That was Then, This is Now*

LeAnne Howe



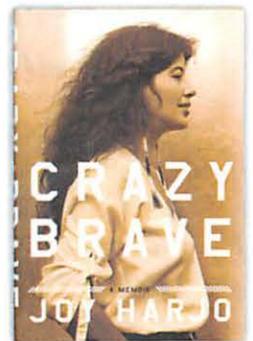
Author, playwright, poet and scholar Howe is an enrolled citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Her novel *Shell Shaker* received the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. Her poetry/prose collection *Evidence of Red* won the Oklahoma Book Award. In 2011, Howe was awarded the Tulsa Library

Trust's American Indian Author Award. She is screenwriter for two documentary projects, *Indian Country Diaries: Spiral of Fire* and *Playing Pastime: American Indian Fast-Pitch Softball*.

Other work—*Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story*

Joy Harjo

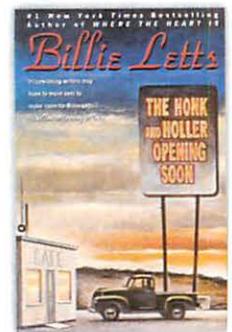
In her poetry, music, prose, and playwriting, Harjo has played a major role in the second wave of the Native American Renaissance. A member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, she is internationally known and has won dozens of awards for her art, including the Lifetime Achievement Awards from both the Native Writers Circle of The Americas and the Oklahoma Center for the Book. Her latest work, *Crazy Brave*, is a memoir of the artist's journey to find her voice.



Other selected works—*Reinventing the Enemy's Language* ☼ *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* ☼ *In Mad Love and War* ☼ *How We Became Human*

Billie Letts

Letts says, "I suppose I'd categorize my books as 'slice of life' novels, what happens to my characters seems to me to be the result of living in the chaos of the real world." Amidst the chaos, Letts's characters search for a place to call home, and they inevitably find it in the most unlikely places. Her first novel, *Where the Heart Is*, received the Walker Percy Award and was an Oprah



Book Club Selection, an honor that introduced millions of readers to her life-affirming novels.

Other works—*The Honk and Holler Opening Soon* ☼ *Shoot the Moon* ☼ *Made in the U.S.A.*

Joyce Carol Thomas

Thomas is an African-American poet, playwright, and author of more than 30 children's books. She left Oklahoma at the age of ten, but the state never left her. Her Ponca City birthplace remains an inspiration for her books, and even a setting for some of her work, including the adult novel *House of Light*, and the National Book Award and American Book Award winner *Marked By Fire*. Her first picture book, *Brown Honey in Broomwheat Tea*, was named a Coretta Scott King Honor Book.

Other selected works—*I Have Heard of a Land* ☼ *Bright Shadow* ☼ *Gingerbread Days* ☼ *The Gospel Cinderella*



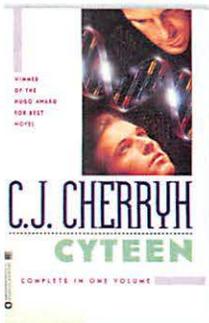
The Genre Masters

Oklahoma women writers have made their mark on popular genre fiction, with settings ranging from South Carolina (Carolyn Hart) to planets light years from Earth (CJ Cherryh).

CJ Cherryh

Science fiction and fantasy author Cherryh has won the Hugo Award for two novels, *Downbelow Station* and *Cyteen*, and for the short story "Cassandra." Fans and critics alike praise her world building skills, where she uses her background in linguistics, archeology and history to give depth to her fictional settings. The author of more than 30 novels, her work has been translated into 14 languages.

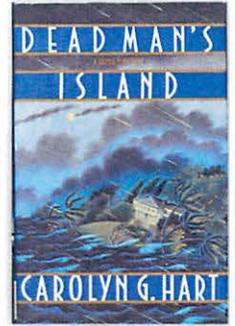
Other selected works—*Foreigner* series ☼ *Chunar* series ☼ *Sunfall* ☼ *Faded Sun Trilogy*



Carolyn Hart

Hart has written 47 novels of mystery and suspense, and she has won multiple Agatha, Anthony and Macavity Awards. The success of her *Death on Demand* and *Henrie O* series have made her one of America's most popular mystery scribes.

Other selected works—*What the Cat Saw* ☼ *Bailey Ruth Raeburn Series* ☼ *Letter from Home*



Mercedes Lackey

Lackey says, "I began writing out of boredom; I continue out of addiction. I began writing fantasy because I love it, but I try to construct my fantasy worlds with all the care of a 'high-tech' science fiction writer." The acclaimed author has written more than 50 novels and many works of short fiction. She often collaborates with her husband, Larry Dixon.



Selected works—*Heralds of Valdemar* series ☼ *The Mage Winds* series ☼ *Reboots*

Anna Myers

Award-winning author Myers is a master of historical fiction for middle grade and young adult readers. *School Library Journal* writes, her "novels show the human side of history by using fictional characters to tell a story of everyday people caught up in monumental events." In *Assassin*, a young seamstress to Mary Todd Lincoln crosses paths with John Wilkes Booth; while in *Spy!*, a young man loyal to the crown meets a new teacher named Nathan Hale.

Other selected works—*Red Dirt Jessie* ☼ *Graveyard Girl* ☼ *The Grave Robber's Secret* ☼ *Time of the Witches*.



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