



Discussion Guide for the **Oklahoma Reads Oklahoma** Book for 2007

Fire in Beulah
by Rilla Askew

Two Families

Fire in Beulah tells the story of two families, one black, one white, whose lives intersect in the tense days of the Oklahoma oil rush. Author Rilla Askew blends historical fact with imagined characters in a vivid examination of heritage and race. At the novel's center is the complex relationship between Althea, an oil wildcatter's high-strung white wife, and her enigmatic black maid, Graceful. The two women bear the same family name, and this seeming coincidence binds them together in ways neither fully understands. Caught up in the inescapable currents of family and violence, their contrapuntal stories—and those of others close to them—sweep relentlessly toward the book's climax in the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921.

Askew employs opposing points of view and the technique of “twinning”—paired, reflective narrative threads—to reveal how separate, even

opposite, our understandings of the world can be. At the same time, a third thread—the story of Creek Freedwoman Iola Bloodgood Bullet Tiger Long—laces the book: a reflection of the state's unique history, as America's three founding races came together in the Twin Territories in what has been called the nation's “great experiment of race.”* In this sense, the Old Testament word *beulah* signifies the Promised Land that Oklahoma became for many early settlers, black and white, while the notion of Oklahoma as the Promised Land may be seen as a bitter irony for the Native tribes who were forced here on the Trail of Tears.

Fire in Beulah is divided into five parts, each section denoting key elements in the novel's narrative and in Oklahoma's story. Opening with a windswept landscape and a harrowing birth

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*See Scott Malcomsen's examination of race in America, *One Drop of Blood*.

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scene on the Whiteside homestead near Bristow in the section called *Wind*, the story jumps twenty years in the next section, *Kin*, and we find ourselves in a wealthy oil wildcatter's house in Tulsa, where the layers of kinship that underlie the story begin to be revealed, as two lynchings and two estranged brothers intrude on the two women's lives.

The section called *Beulah* opens with a memorial service in a black church on the prairie outside Arcadia. This section is told by an unnamed narrator who appears here and nowhere else. The speaker is an articulate and insightful African American churchgoer who understands the significance of the scene, and it is here that the book's overarching theme is revealed. The fourth section, *Oil*, unmask the forces and consequences of greed unleashed in a no-holds-barred oil rush and illuminates a certain unsavory element in history: the theft of Native oil rights.

The last section, *Fire*, tells the story of the Tulsa Race Riot itself. As the riot unfolds, the novel's various narratives come together in a cacophony of voices and visions. The conflagration in Greenwood becomes the crucible that melds and tests each of the characters, revealing the deep and simple truth at the heart of the American story: that we are all irrevocably tied to one another.

About the Author

Rilla Askew was born in southeastern Oklahoma, a fifth generation descendant of southerners who settled in the Choctaw Nation in the late 1800s. Askew's roots go deep in the Sans Bois country, where her family still lives, but she grew up fifty miles from Tulsa in the oil company town of Bartlesville. It was there she first encountered the complex forces of race, class,

and societal opinion: elements she continues to explore in her fiction. Askew lived several years in Tahlequah before moving to Tulsa, where she graduated from the University of Tulsa with a degree in theatre performance. In 1980 she moved to New York to pursue an acting career, but she soon turned to writing fiction and went on to study creative writing at Brooklyn College, where she received her MFA in 1989. Her first published story, "The Gift," appeared in Nimrod's "Oklahoma Indian Markings" issue that same year. It was also in 1989 that Askew first learned of the Tulsa Race Riot while reading a biography of novelist Richard Wright. Like many Oklahomans then, she had never heard that part of the state's history. She knew at once, she says, that she would write about it.

Askew's collection of stories, *Strange Business*, received the Oklahoma Book Award in 1993, and one of its stories, "The Killing Blanket" was selected for Prize Stories 1993: The O. Henry Awards. Her first novel, *The Mercy Seat*, which had its seeds in old stories about her family's migration into Indian Territory, was nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award, the Dublin IMPAC Prize, and received the Oklahoma Book Award and the Western Heritage Award in 1998. The book that fulfilled her determination to write about the Tulsa riot, *Fire in Beulah*, received the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation and the Myers Book Award from the Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights in 2002. Her latest novel, *Harp song*, is published by the University of Oklahoma Press. She is married to actor Paul Austin and they divide their time between Oklahoma, where she teaches at the University of Oklahoma, and their home in the Catskill Mountains in upstate New York.

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Suggested Topics for Discussion

One of the greatest rewards of reading a good book is discussing it with others. These discussions may be formal or informal, and may take place while in the car, over the dinner table, in the break room at work, at a library, or a bookstore...almost anywhere.

1. In the opening section, the first person narrator, Iola, interrupts the seemingly authoritative omniscient narrator (page 10), directly contradicting the main narrator's account of events. How might this be interpreted in light of history's official "authoritative" account of the Tulsa Race Riot and other historical racial incidents?

2. Althea is a difficult character — neurotic, dishonest, self-centered — yet she is the main point-of-view character in the book. How do you respond to Althea and her treatment of her husband, and of Graceful? Which other characters in history or in fiction might she be compared to? Do you gain sympathy for her as the story progresses? How does the episode with the calf and the subsequent birth in the first section shape her?

3. Graceful is a mystery to Althea, and in the opening chapters to the reader as well. Discuss Graceful's character. Why is her inner life so closed off from Althea?

4. The relationship between Graceful and Althea dominates the book, and yet they seem never to fully know one another. How does their relationship reflect relations between African-Americans and white Americans in this country, both in the past and in the present? In what ways and where do Althea and Graceful reverse roles? Throughout the novel Althea seems to be nearly obsessed with Graceful. Why? What does she want from her?

5. Early in the book we learn that the women have the same family name, Whiteside, yet the reason for this is never spelled out in the book. Do you have the sense that Althea and Graceful are literal kin or, as in the case of many who bear the same name, distant or metaphorical kin? How is their shared name a commentary on the legacy of slavery?

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"I'm a fifth-generation Oklahoman. Both sides of my family came to Indian Territory in the late 1800s, so in that sense I'm deeply Oklahoman. Everything about who I am as an individual was shaped by the forces of this place."

— Rilla Askew

(From an article that appeared in *Humanities Interview*, a publication of the Oklahoma Humanities Council, Summer 2005)



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- 6.** Japheth's birth and death frame the novel; his malevolence and hunger, and his effect on Althea, give the book its narrative drive. Yet he, too, is an enigmatic character. What drives him to do the things he does? In what ways do his intentions and the driving force inside him change as the story progresses? What is the significance of Japheth's name?
- 7.** Compare Japheth with Graceful's brother T.J. How do their stories contrast, reflect one another? What incidents shape each of them? How does each behave during the riot?
- 8.** Locate and discuss the various incidents of "twinning" in the book: the paired, reflective narrative threads. How are the many pairings alike or different? What do they signify?
- 9.** There are three birthing scenes in the novel. Discuss the implications of the three births in relation to their place in the novel and to one another. Why three and not two?
- 10.** Iola Tiger's voice is the dominant truth-telling voice in the novel. She serves much as the Greek chorus served in early drama, and indeed she complains early on: "Ain't that like whitefolks, think I got time to drop by and tidy up their story. Think I don't have my own life to tell." (page 10) Does the reader get to know Iola's story? Why is her voice in the novel? How would the story work without her?
- 11.** Iola speaks of a Big Snake in the waters of the Deep Fork, Ezekiel's vision of a Wheel in a Wheel, and a great Force unleashed from under the earth. (pages 190-198) What do each of these symbolize? Where do the original references come from?
- 12.** The author uses racial terms authentic to the period, but these words can make contemporary readers extremely uncomfortable. How did you respond to the language in the

book? The descriptions of lynchings and the events of the riot? Althea's treatment of Graceful? Franklin's treatment of Graceful?

13. Franklin bears witness to much of the riot. Seeing the aftermath, he stands in the street wondering: "How had such a thing happened? This was Tulsa, Oklahoma; this was America. It made no sense. Why hadn't somebody stopped it?" (page 364) Discuss the possible answers to these questions. How does the novel seem to answer the questions?

14. Discuss the notion of redemption and whether or not Althea achieves it in the end. Would you have wished the story to end differently? How? In what ways does the ending reflect racial relationships in 1921?

15. What knowledge of the Tulsa Race Riot did you have before reading this novel? How did reading *Fire in Beulah* add to, enrich, or shape your understanding of these events?

Public Appearances

Rilla will be touring libraries throughout the state in the fall of 2007. Check out www.okreadsok.org for dates, places and times. Statewide sponsors for the tour are the Oklahoma Department of Libraries, the Oklahoma Humanities Council, the Oklahoma Centennial Commission, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

For more information

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