

Most American: A United We Stand Theme

In the turbulent 1930s, Oklahoman Woody Guthrie penned his famous lyrics *This land is your land, this land is my land*, and the song is still widely sung in schools, at rallies and community celebrations. Often, though, it seems that only the second half of the chorus is really meant—this land is *my* land. This land is *our* land. Meaning people who look like me, speak like me, have the same histories as me. How do we stand united as Americans when there seems to be so much that divides us? This series seeks to foster cross-cultural understanding, empathy, and community resilience by introducing readers to works that recognize the myriad ways *we* are *they*, and *they* are *us*.

“Most American” looks at our shared but separate histories—rich, complex, wounded, inspiring—which we may not think of as belonging to all of us. And yet they do. Each is a piece of the American tapestry, a narrative that has played out in especially dramatic, sometimes violent, always compelling ways in Oklahoma. These four books—two novels, a collection of stories, and a collection of essays—ask interwoven questions in myriad ways: What does it mean to be ‘American’? Whose America is it? Who gets to be called ‘American,’ and who decides that identity?

Most American: Notes from a Wounded Place

By Rilla Askew

In *Most American: Notes from a Wounded Place*, my collection of creative nonfiction essays, I propose that Oklahoma, although often obscured in the national narrative, is, in fact, the most American of places. To me, Oklahoma’s story *is* the American story: complicated, riven, filled with both woundedness and hope. In nine linked essays covering topics from the Oklahoma City Bombing to the Trail of Tears, snake killing to killer tornados, I take a look at how this state’s history reflects the national narrative. I trace my own awakening to the privileges and presumptions of whiteness I grew up with in eastern Oklahoma as I seek to uncover and examine hidden histories I didn’t know about or understand. The work covers varied landscapes, from my family’s home territory in southeastern Oklahoma to the Cherokee hills around Tahlequah to the powerful Wichita Mountains in the American southwest. Taken together, the essays consider how this state’s heritage of migration and ethnic cleansing, heroism and racial violence, self-sacrifice and greed reflect the whole of the American paradox: what is best and worst in us.

The Roads of My Relations

By Devon A. Mihesuah

The second book in the series, a collection of stories by Choctaw writer Devon A. Mihesuah, *The Roads of My Relations*, is a trans-generational saga told in multiple

voices. These stories chronicle the lives of a close-knit Choctaw family from the time before they are forced from their Mississippi homelands into Indian Territory, through many generations in southeastern Oklahoma, and on into the 21st century. I was immediately intrigued when I first came upon these wonderful stories, many of which are set near Red Oak, my family's hometown going back several generations. The voices in the stories, at once familiar to me and uniquely Mihesuah's own, remind me of a powerful history. This is a place I've often written about (Red Oak becomes in my work the fictional town of Cedar), a place I've lived in, and on, and yet have never known in this deep way. Grounded in stories handed down in Mihesuah's own family, these engaging tales transgress western expectations of narrative. The voices are multiple and varied. The stories do not necessarily follow a traditional narrative arc: they are resolved at times, and other times not. Here, the unseen is as real as the seen. Here, the family holds their ties to the land despite every force seeking to wrest it from them. Peopled with stalwart matriarchs, shapeshifting witches, damaged characters, courageous women and girls, men and boys, the stories collectively express a violence that is endemic to our history even as they plumb the power of place, the forces of family, and the endurance and survivance of Choctaw people in this land.

Citizens Creek

By Lalita Tademy

The third book in the series, *Citizens Creek* by Lalita Tademy, is a rich multi-generational novel focused on the lesser-known history of enslaved African Americans forced to accompany Native American tribes on the Trail of Tears. From my first reading I was impressed with the carefully researched historical detail in this novel and how deftly it is combined with vivid characterization and propulsive storytelling. *Citizens Creek* focuses on two actual historical characters, Cow Tom, a famed linguist born into slavery in Alabama, who ultimately was named a Muscogee chief in post-Civil War Indian Territory, and his granddaughter, Rose Simmons. The novel magnifies unheard voices, tells untold stories as it carries readers through years of volatile history. Every adventure, every crossroads, every complication reveals complex layers of identity and prejudice, hardship and perseverance, tenacity and strength. Those readers familiar with Oklahoma's tribal Freedmen will see the historical underpinning of today's controversies as the characters endure complications imposed on their status and their lives in the aftermath of the Civil War. Those readers who are unfamiliar with this part of our history will come to understand an important piece of our American story. Divided into two sections, the first focusing on Cow Tom and the second on his granddaughter Rose, the book lends itself easily to being read and discussed over the course of two sessions.

American Ending

By Mary Kay Zuravleff

The final selection, *American Ending* by Mary Kay Zuravleff, is an historical novel set among Russian immigrants in the coal mining country of eastern Pennsylvania. This is the only book in the series not set in Oklahoma, but it is written by an Oklahoma author: Mary Kay Zuravleff grew up in Oklahoma City and has deep ties to the state. This delightful and riveting novel, told in the voice of a young girl who is the first in her family to be born in America, rounds out the theme of the series by asking in direct and nuanced terms: who gets to be an American? The author mines her own family's history to tell a powerful story of a first-generation child growing up torn between the cultural constraints of the Old Country and freedom's pull in the New World. In this novel, the Old World constraints surrounding young Yelena are a community of Russian Old Believers, a specific culture and religious sect. Yet every hardship the characters encounter, every push they make to become more thoroughly American, and every setback they endure in that effort, can be translated to today. I was struck by the ways that the immigrant miners' lives in *American Ending* vividly mirror the coal mining communities in early-day southeastern Oklahoma, which I'm familiar with from my research and the coal miner stories handed down in my family. I think many readers will see parallels between their own family's origination stories and young Yelena's struggles with, and for, her family. It's a quintessentially American tale: immigrant communities striving to hold to the traditions, language, and faith of the culture they come from even as they embrace what it means to be American. The novel contrasts powerfully with another important American story, one that has manifested so acutely in Oklahoma: Indigenous peoples locked in a relentless struggle against their traditions, language, and faith being stripped away by the forces of America.

Our master narrative often calls this nation a melting pot, but the United States is most definitely not a melting pot. We do not blend and stew our cultures and histories together to create one uniform bland mush. An apter metaphor is the crazy quilt: all the myriad fabrics and textures and colors stitched together, situated uniquely side by side, inextricable, all of a piece, and yet tightly connected, lest the whole quilt come undone.

Credits

This theme is part of the National Endowment for the Humanities' *United We Stand: Connecting Through Culture* initiative. This initiative aims to combat hate-based violence through community engagement by fostering cross-cultural understanding, empathy, and community resilience.



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“Most American: A United We Stand Theme” was developed by Rilla Askew. Best known for her American Book Award-winning novel about the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, *Fire in Beulah*, she has long been telling Oklahoma stories. She’s the author of five novels, a book of short fiction, and a collection of creative nonfiction. For her work, Rilla has received the Arrell Gibson Lifetime Achievement Award from the Oklahoma Center for the Book and an Arts and Letters Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She’s a PEN/Faulkner Finalist and recipient of the Oklahoma Book Award, the Western Heritage Award, the Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Award, the Violet Crown Award from the Writers League of Texas, and the WILLA Award from Women Writing the West. Askew’s collection of essays, *Most American: Notes from a Wounded Place* (OU Press 2017), was longlisted for PEN America’s Diamonstein-Spielvogel Award for the Art of the Essay. Her most recent novel, *Prize for the Fire* (OU Press 2022), is about Early Modern English writer Anne Askew, who was burned as a heretic in 1546. A new collection of short fiction, *The Hungry and the Haunted*, is forthcoming from Belle Point Press in September 2024.