



Two Books, One Community
GREAT GATSBY & FIRE IN BEULAH

Introduction to Fire in Beulah

Set during the tense days of the Oklahoma oil rush, Rilla Askew's *Fire in Beulah* is a mesmerizing story that centers on the complex relationship between Althea Whiteside, an oil wildcatter's high-strung wife, and Graceful, her enigmatic black maid. Their juxtaposing stories—and those of others close to them—unfold against a volatile backdrop of oil-boom opulence, fear, hatred, lynchings that climax in the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, when whites burned the city's prosperous black community.

On the evening of May 31, 1921, in Tulsa, OK, a mob of whites congregated in front of the city jail, where an African-American man was being held for assaulting a white woman. Although the "assault" had consisted of the man's accidentally stepping on the woman's foot, it was a severe enough violation for him to be arrested and more than enough for rumors to spread throughout the city and beyond about “*a nigger's having raped a white woman.*”

Two lynchings had recently taken place in Oklahoma -- of a white man in Tulsa and an African-American man in Oklahoma City -- so there was bloodlust in the night air, on both sides of the tracks that divided Tulsa's blacks and whites. A group of African-American men began to congregate on the north side of the city, known as Greenwood, an urban enclave W.E.B. Du Bois had called "the finest example of Negro self-sufficiency in the United States." These men formed their own haphazard militia, gathered up the guns they had and headed toward the jail in white Tulsa. These were the events that touched off the most violent race riot in American history.

By the end of the next evening, June 1, Greenwood had been burned to the ground. Hundreds of "deputized" white Tulsans led an assault across the railroad tracks, murdering African-Americans indiscriminately. Those fortunate enough to survive the

"ethnic cleansing" were either corralled in makeshift concentration camps or escaped by fleeing farther north of town.

Author Biography

Rilla Askew received a 2009 Arts and Letters Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Her essays and short fiction have appeared in a variety of journals, and her story "The Killing Blanket" was selected for Prize Stories 1993: The O. Henry Awards. Askew's first novel, *THE MERCY SEAT*, was nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award, the Dublin IMPAC Prize, was a Boston Globe Notable Book, and received the Oklahoma Book Award and the Western Heritage Award in 1998. *FIRE IN BEULAH*, her novel about the Tulsa Race Riot, received the American Book Award and the Myers Book Award from the Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights. She was a 2004 fellow at Civiella Ranieri in Umbertide, Italy, and in 2008 her novel *HARPSONG* received the Oklahoma Book Award, the Western Heritage Award, the WILLA Award from Women Writing the West, and the Violet Crown Award from the Writers League of Texas. Askew received the 2011 Arrell Gibson Lifetime Achievement Award from the Oklahoma Center for the Book. Her new novel *KIND OF KIN* will be published by Ecco Press in January 2013 and in the UK by Atlantic Books in August.

Five generations of Rilla Askew's family have occupied southeastern Oklahoma. Celebrating this birthright, she has concocted of it her own Faulknerian kingdom. Askew is writing a mythic cycle, novels and stories that unsettle our view of the West's settling. In a continuous fictional mural populated with hardscrabble souls - credible, noble and flawed - Askew is completing the uncompleted crossing of the plains. Trusting prose that is disciplined, luxuriant and muscular, she is forging a chronicle as humane as it is elemental." (Allan Gurganus, May 20, 2009, American Academy of Arts and Letters)

Fire in Beulah Discussion Questions

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?
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? 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. (pg. 190-198) What do each of these symbolize? From where do the original references come?
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?

Discussion questions re-printed courtesy of the Oklahoma Department of Libraries

Additional Resources

- <http://www.riverfronttimes.com/stlouis/the-fire-this-time/Content?oid=2472105>
- <http://alt-current.blogspot.com/2015/02/thepark14.html>
- <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Fire-in-Beulah/331102077004757?rf=242057692592101>
- Author website: www.RillaAskew.com