

**BILLIE DEAN
GIPSON
LETTS
1938-2014**



**NEVER
TOO OLD
TO BE A
NOVELIST**

For years, Billie Letts believed she was a writer, even though nothing got published and her dream of becoming a successful writer was just that – a dream. But things began to change. A New York agent she met said Billie’s story was compelling. The result was her first novel “Where the Heart Is” when she was 57.

Billie Dean Gipson was born in May 1938 in Tulsa. Her parents were so poor that the only two books in the house were the Bible and Erskine Caldwell’s “Gods’ Little Acre”. She used the latter for a fourth-grade book report that caused such a stir that, at age nine, the idea of becoming a writer took hold.

After graduating from Union High School in 1956, she attended Northeastern State College in Tahlequah for two years. There she met Dennis Letts, and soon she was pregnant. They were married in December 1958, putting her dreams of being a professional writer on hold. At thirty, the mother of two sons and about to graduate from college, she moved to Denmark when Dennis became a Fulbright lecturer. After returning to America, Letts received her bachelor’s from Southeast Missouri State in 1969 and a master’s in behavioral studies from Southeastern Oklahoma State University in 1974, where she taught English and creative writing for 20 years.

As retirement approached, Letts had a box of rejection slips, a thick notebook filled with terrible poetry, one play she cowrote with Dennis, six screenplays, a stack of short stories and dozens of files filled with ideas for more stories. By this time, son Tracy was acting and writing plays in Chicago, son Shawn was a Singapore jazz musician/composer, and Dennis, now retired from teaching, was acting in films.

Letts was still dreaming of becoming a “real” writer, with her name on the cover of a book. At age 55, she went to a writers’ conference in New Orleans where, because she registered early, got the opportunity to meet with a literary agent Elaine Markson for fifteen minutes. A week later, Markson called Letts in Oklahoma to say that she had read her screenplay and wanted to see the short fiction she mentioned. Letts sent her two, and at the back of the one she had entitled “Where the Heart Is”, she had slipped a note saying that the story wouldn’t let her go. Markson called as soon as she read it, suggesting that it might be the beginning of a novel. It was. Two years later, Jamie Rabb at Warner Books read the completed manuscript and bought it. It was published in 1995.

“Where the Heart Is” is the story of Novalee Nation, a pregnant, broke and homeless teenager looking for a better life with her boyfriend. When they stopped at the Sequoyah, Oklahoma Walmart so she could go to the bathroom and buy shoes, he abandons her. For the next two months, Novalee hides out in the Walmart, until the birth of her ‘Walmart baby’ makes her a local star. Eccentric local Sister Husband gives her a place to stay, photographer Moses Whitecotton teaches her photography and nurse Lexie Coop becomes her best friend.

Some critics trashed the book and it quickly went to paperback, seemingly forgotten. That’s when destiny stepped in on a grand scale. In January 1999, Oprah Winfred selected it for her Book Club, a Midas touch for a book that practically guarantees bestseller status. The book hit number one on the New York Times paperback bestseller list, eventually selling over three million copies worldwide. Letts had become an overnight literary sensation. A movie version of her book was released in 2000, starring Natalie Portman and Ashley Judd.

Letts published more novels, including 1998’s “The Honk and Holler Opening Soon” and 2004’s “Shoot the Moon”, although neither equaled the enormous success of her debut. But the Letts family’s fortunes were changing. Dennis appeared in nearly fifty films while son Tracy found success with his play “August: Osage County” in 2007, winning a Pulitzer Prize for Drama and a Tony Award for Best Play. It was adapted into the 2013 movie starring Meryl Streep and Julie Roberts. Tracy would also win a Tony Award for acting in 2013.

Letts received the Oklahoma Book Award in 1996 and 1999, and was inducted into the Oklahoma Writers Hall of Fame in 1998. After Dennis died of cancer in 2008, Letts ceased publishing any new work. She was honored with the Arrell Gibson Lifetime Achievement Award in 2013. Letts died of pneumonia in August 2014 at age 76. She took George Eliot’s words to heart; “It is never too late to be what you might have been.”