

**RILLA
ASKEW
1951-**



**UNDERSTANDING
RACE
HISTORY**

In 1989, Oklahoma award-winning novelist Rilla Askew was reading the great African-American novelist Richard Wright's biography when she discovered in the first pages of the book a reference of the Tulsa riot. "I grew up fifty miles from there but had never heard of it. How could that be?"

Askew was born in Poteau in 1951 and grew up in Bartlesville. She graduated from the University of Tulsa with a Bachelor's degree in Theater Performance in 1980, and soon left for New York City to become an actress. She found her true talent in creative writing, earning a Master's degree from Brooklyn College in 1989.

As Askew researched the May 1921 events at the Tulsa Public Library, she discovered all newspaper archives about the event had been expunged from mid-May through August. Eventually she found articles in the New York Times, as well as black newspapers in the Ralph Ellison Library in Oklahoma City.

On the evening of May 31st, a white mob congregated downtown, where an African-American man was jailed for assaulting a white woman. Although the "assault" consisted of him accidentally stepping on the woman's foot while riding a downtown elevator, it was a severe enough violation for him to be arrested and rumors to spread throughout the city and beyond that a black man raped a white woman.

At sunrise, hundreds of white Tulsans marched into Greenwood – a wealthy north Tulsa area known as "Black Wall Street" – murdering African-Americans indiscriminately. By the evening of June 1st, a thousand homes and businesses were burned to the ground, with nearly a thousand people dead. In order to save Tulsa's reputation, city leaders soon adapted a culture of silence, including news suppression.

Askew knew at once that she would write about it. It was still very hard to uncover the facts, but the climate of white supremacy that led to it was starkly evident in every newspaper archive Askew read. She didn't want white characters to be the saviors, as is so often the case in stories of racial violence written by white authors, but rather the perpetrators of the apocalyptic destruction.

In 2000, Askew published "Fire in Beulah", a story of two families during the Oklahoma oil rush. The story blends historical fact with fictional characters and events 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. Caught up in the inescapable currents of family and violence, their contrapuntal stories sweep relentlessly toward the book's climax in the Tulsa Race Massacre.

Askew's acclaimed novel received the American Book Award and Myers Book Award from the Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights in 2002. Although it may sting, the unearthed truth is the power behind healing. "We have to own those truths in order to move forward and mature as a people spiritually, emotionally and economically," Askew said.