

Letter to a Fan of *Okie Chronicles*
By Pamela Harrison
2008

Dear ____,

What a rare and wonderful surprise for me to receive your thoughtful and searching letter in response to *Okie Chronicles*.... Writing poems is generally such a private calling, and poets so seldom learn (though we most certainly hope) whether our words actually speak to others unless passionate readers take the time to reach out and articulate their experience as you have done. I would be honored to try and answer your fine questions.

“Are the characters real people?” Actually, no. You’ll find no birth certificates for Ruth and Leon and Betty on file at the county seat. But they were modeled on members of my own family. Ruth is an amalgam of my mother-in-law’s experience and my own mother’s temperament. Leon began with aspects of my father, rounded out by my experience of my own dear husband and some farming men that I have known. The children and their misadventures are most directly taken from real life and the lived stories of my brother, sister, and me. (Emma Jane is...me as a young girl). Betty is my fictional/emotional alter-ego. Many of her poems grew right out of my own experience and inner life. Betty and Leon’s story gave me a chance to articulate my own personal experience of infertility and to work through my father’s story of infidelity with a happier outcome. So, although the characters, per se, never existed except in my head and on the page, familial personalities and experience underwrote and inspired their creation. I discovered, as I worked and sifted through familiar old family stories, as many fiction writers do, that my characters took on a life of their own as my imagination got to know them better.

As for Ozelle, she is modeled on my great grandmother, Mary Parlee. It was perhaps presumptuous of me to dare to speak for her, especially since I had only the barest details of her story and personality to go on. Her experience of the Run was as close to fact as the family story carried. Her words in 1928 were all mine, however, as I hoped to set a context for the spiritual and practical challenges of that time and place that everyone in the family faced and resolved (or not) in their own way in the poems that follow.

A great deal of the inspiration for my telling and shaping and ordering of the stories arose from my understanding of Oklahoma, the dry, windy, difficult land I grew up in, augmented by my own personal experience of living for 8 years on a small farm in Canaan {New Hampshire} with my husband and daughter (who’s now almost 30).

How did I put myself “in the mind and body of each person?” That was the necessary work of my own writerly imagination, fortified by my deep, deep memories of the language and rhythms of the Oklahomans I grew up among. The rhythm itself set some things going. I have indulged since childhood a life-long empathy that has set me to watching and wondering about who people are on the inside, how they come to act as they do, what organic orientation or circumstantial event caused them to be the way they are in their

values, speech and gesture. I think this practiced empathy or watchfulness was greatly provoked as a coping mechanism, a survival tool in my family of origin, helping me as a very young child to orient myself in a family where much—very much—of an emotional nature remained unsaid but weirdly resonant in the air around me. Watching and wondering about what made other people tick, what they seemed to want when they never said so, became a way of warding off nasty surprises. (See my poem, “Stereopticon” in my collection of the same name.)

“How did I choose what to tell—and what to leave unsaid?” Well, that’s a formal decision. For *Okie Chronicles*, I wanted to explore various kinds of personal stoicism and faith in the face of disappointment. I wanted to celebrate the grit, integrity, and humor with which my family and ancestors endured. So I picked incidents that would allow me to give a graphic sense of their work and their day-to-day challenges and responses. I don’t know how my larger family has received this book. Perhaps some of them are embarrassed by or disapproving of the sexual explicitness and dimensions of some of the tale. Perhaps some dislike the doctrinal refusals of Betty. Mostly my relatives have been resoundingly silent and unresponsive about the book. (Let’s just say, I’ve gotten no kind letters of approval from them). But I didn’t write the book for them. I wrote it to celebrate working people, the rhythms and language I grew up in before going off to Smith, and to show the world that being poor, working class, or uneducated is not synonymous with being venal, violent, greedy, or stupid. My family were never that. They just never had the blessings I enjoyed. I admire their character, courage, and kindness.

Perhaps I have said more than you wanted, but I’m happy for the occasion your questions have given me to set out some of my intentions. I hope my comments might be of some use to you in your own endeavors to tell your family stories. (Give yourself some creative latitude to capture the spirit if not all the facts! You’ll have to decide if you want to be a historian and archivist or to tell your own tale according to what you personally find important and enduringly valuable in the telling). I kind of like what Nietzsche said: “There are no facts. Only interpretations.” Every story told has to make choices of what is included and what angle of approach or perspective on the events will be maintained. So each story told is only one person’s point of view. I’m of the opinion each telling is valuable, no matter how contradictory they all might seem when lined up side by side. The world is a wild and varied place. Only God gets the whole story.