



## Discussion Guide

for the **Oklahoma Reads Oklahoma** Book for 2004

*The Honk and Holler Opening Soon*  
by Billie Letts

Guide prepared by William M. Hagen

After years as a mother and an English/Journalism teacher, Billie Letts achieved success as a novelist just before turning sixty, when her first novel, *Where the Heart Is*, was published in 1995. Letts wept when she first saw the book on the shelves, feeling that she'd finally achieved her life-long dream of becoming a "real" writer.

Born Billie Gibson in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1938, the author had an awkward childhood. She was told by one uncle that she "was the only girl in Oklahoma who had a dog prettier than she was." A grandmother, good friends, neighbors and a librarian helped nurture and direct her toward reading and storytelling. As an elementary student, she soon started reading outside the school library collection.

She recalls with pleasure the stir she created in the fourth grade when she made a book report on Erskine Caldwell's *God's Little Acre*. "If I had the power to agitate a language-arts

teacher in Tulsa, Oklahoma, by simply writing about someone else's writing, how much power might I have in telling my own stories? I suspect it was then, at age nine, that the idea of becoming a writer took hold." Winning a writing contest at age twelve seemed to confirm the possibility.

The first in her family to go to college, Letts washed windows, carhopped, and taught dancing, among other jobs, to help pay tuition. She met Dennis Letts at Northeastern State University, and married him in 1958. During the 1960s, she put her own education on hold for the sake of her family, working part-time and summers to supplement her husband's modest teaching salary. In 1969, she completed her undergraduate studies at Southeast Missouri State College and earned a Masters from Oklahoma State University in 1974. By that time, the Letts had established

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themselves in Durant, where Dennis had joined the faculty at Southeastern State University; Billie taught in public schools and the university until her retirement in the late 90s.

Letts had written a number of screenplays—some with her husband—during her years of teaching. But it was the story about a girl who lived in a Wal-Mart, which attracted the attention of a literary agent at a writer’s conference. The agent urged her to enlarge the story of Novalee Nation, to answer a question that had been tormenting Letts herself: How was a homeless, pregnant, seventeen-year-old girl going to survive in the long run? As it turned out, luck, her own strengths, and good people in a small Oklahoma town combined to enable Novalee to build a life for herself and her child, and even give back to the community.

The novel was a bestseller, featured in Oprah’s Book Club, and subsequently made into a feature film (2000), starring Natalie Portman and Ashley Judd. Dennis Letts had a supporting role as the sheriff. Perhaps spurred by seeing her first book on-screen, Letts has co-authored a screenplay of her second novel, with son Tracy, who has had some success with Off-Broadway productions.

Readers and reviewers of the first novel liked the variety of characters, each with his or her own voice, and the sense of neighborliness found in Sequoyah, Oklahoma. As a social document, *Where the Heart Is* suggests that solutions to such problems as teen pregnancy, broken families, child abuse, and prejudice lie in the resilience and natural generosity of individuals living within a supportive community. It is clearly a message that

resonates with many Americans, especially young people who feel lost and alone. So many have been touched by the novel that a book was published called *You’ve Got Mail, Billie Letts*. As she puts it, “they want to believe there are places in America like Sequoyah, where racism, sexism, and classism do not override hopes and possibility....they trust that they, like Novalee, might be lucky enough to find caring people out there who will help them build ‘families’ of their own.”

*Honk and Holler* returns readers to the mythical town of Sequoyah, to a time before Novalee appears. Set in the mid-1980s, the novel focuses on four characters who work in a diner named “The Honk and Holler Opening Soon,” a name too enthusiastically committed to neon twelve years earlier. The owner, Caney Paxton is a paraplegic Vietnam vet who has not been outside the cafe since it opened. He and Molly O, his waitress, shape their lives around their customers, attempting to live in the present.

Things change, however, when Vena Takes Horse and Bui Khanh, a Vietnamese immigrant, walk in the door and talk their way into working for Caney. While Vena is, in a sense, the kind of rootless wanderer that Novalee Nation could have become, the character of Bui would seem to have been a special challenge. But Letts could draw from her teaching experiences in the mid-1970s when over a hundred Vietnamese refugees were brought to Southeastern State University. “I was...faced with classrooms filled with confused, frightened and lonely students. So I learned their names and faces and stories.”

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Vena and Bui inject new energy into the cafe and enlarge the lives of Caney, Molly O and the cafe's regulars. Probably because of her own history of moving from place to place and teaching students who are themselves adapting to a new place, Letts has a special fondness for "fish-out-of-water" characters, the ones who are set down in an environment that is alien to them. As Vena and Bui encounter the customs and customers of the Honk and Holler, the cafe becomes a microcosm of Sequoyah, a gathering place that shows the moral character of small town Oklahoma. The novel becomes a testament of the extent to which a community can incorporate strangers and the extent to which it can discipline and heal its own.

At a point when she is thinking of leaving Sequoyah, Vena realizes how much she has grown accustomed to this community: "[she]...watched the way Soldier hooked his thumb over the rim of his coffee cup when he raised it to his mouth and how Hooks squinted when he chewed on a toothpick...watched the way Bilbo tilted his head to blow his smoke away from Peg's bluish face and how Wanda Sue pulled at her ear when she passed on her latest gossip...watched the way Bui bowed shyly to compliments and how Life looked at Molly O like a puppy waiting to be petted. Watched the way Caney's eyes...studied her from across the room" (*page 257 of the Warner paperback*).

Living as they do, each with their own ghosts from the past, Caney, Molly O, Vena and Bui find some resolution and hope within the network of relationships that make up this place called Sequoyah, Oklahoma. For readers, what may finally matter at the end of Billie Letts' second novel is that such a place seems possible in their own lives.

### Consider the following:

**1.** The novel features four characters, all of whom work at the "Honk and Holler Opening Soon"—Caney Paxton, Molly O, Vena Takes Horse, and Bui Khanh. Notice that each one has to settle something or settle with someone from their past life before they can move on. Another common element in their stories (and others' stories) is the **emphasis on childhood**: how they were shaped as children, how they shaped other children's lives, the question of whether to have children. Consider or discuss how each was shaped as a child, how each impacted other children's lives, and how they react to the prospect of a new child entering their lives.

Does the focus on childhood or children help explain any of the other characters in the novel? How about Sam? Others? (See #11, p. 302 of the Warner paperback for more questions on this theme.)

**2.** The **neon sign**, "The Honk and Holler Opening Soon," is a bit of a joke after twelve years. There must be many such signs, erected with enthusiasm. For instance, there's an old sign on the Turner Turnpike that advertises "Oklahoma's newest motel." Can you think of signs you have seen like these? What is your reaction to them? Is there something very "Oklahoman," or very "American," about such signs?

Billie Letts talks about the sign idea (293), but not why it became the novel's title. Focus on the embarrassing "Opening Soon": Does it signify a drunken moment in Caney's past, and nothing more? Does the sign in any way relate to the events in the novel or what happens to the main characters?

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**3. Vietnam** is another thematic thread: Caney has been there and remembers; Bui escaped the country and has hopes of bringing his wife to America. He is aware that “with TV images...Vietnam was still ... painful” (65) for many to remember, including himself. After his violent encounter with Sam, Bui even asks Caney whether he too thought about shooting him (255). Consider or discuss how this novel is “about” the different ways our country has sorted through the Vietnam experience.

**4. Caney** has the most vivid memories of Vietnam. He seems to represent a generation of veterans who attempted to shut out their battle experiences. In what ways is he held captive by his memories? How (and where) is he able to liberate himself from Vietnam? Did you find Letts’ depiction of him, his memories, and how he comes out of them to be convincing?

**5.** Similarly, what does the novel suggest, through the stories of **Brenda and Helen**, about the chances for saving (or losing) children who run away from home and family? In particular, do you think that the “concert” at the Honk and Holler (Chapter 28), marks a turning in Brenda’s life, given the fact she leaves her mother again? In Helen’s case, does the letter Vena finds (265) help explain why Helen was lost, or whether Vena should feel guilty about not being with her?

**6. Bui Khanh** has an interesting relationship with Galilee and the members of the AME church where he secretly lives. Talk about what he does for the church (and why). How can he, as a Buddhist, finally be accepted by this Christian congregation? You might want to review, Chapter 27, which features a rather

amazing conversion of the congregation by Galilee.

**7.** Billie Letts indicates that she had difficulties keeping the voices natural, keeping the **characters** sounding like themselves. How successful was she with the various characters, especially the regulars in the cafe?

At one point (229-231), Life actually “finds” a voice to begin an active courtship with Molly O. Were you completely surprised (maybe unconvinced), or did you see this coming?

**8.** Does this novel strike you as fairly accurate on the kinds of people and the kinds of behavior one might find in a **small town** in Oklahoma? As a portrait of small town life, what are the novel’s strengths? Any weaknesses or omissions? Did you connect anything in the novel to your town from reading this novel?

**9.** Don’t neglect the good discussion questions and sections on Billie Letts at the end of the Warner Books paperback, if you have that edition.

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*Professor Hagen has served as a scholar in the “Let’s Talk About It, Oklahoma” series since its inception in the 1980s and is presently a member of its board. He currently serves as Chair of the Board of Directors of the Pioneer Library System.*

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