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Oklahoma Reads Oklahoma

The Honk and Holler Opening Soon is Voters' Choice
for First Statewide Reading and Discussion Program

A best-selling novel about the power of love and friendship has been selected by state citizens as the "Oklahoma Reads Oklahoma" Book for 2004. *The Honk and Holler Opening Soon*, by Oklahoma native Billie Letts, was selected from a list of six titles that were nominated for the first ever statewide reading and discussion program.

More than 1600 citizens voted online at okreadsok.org. Thirty-three percent of the voters selected Letts' book.

Libraries, booksellers and schools in the state are now gearing up to host reading and discussion programs on the winning book throughout 2004.

In *The Honk and Holler Opening Soon*, a group of disparate characters come together in the mythical town of Sequoyah, Oklahoma. Despite often great odds, the group is ultimately able to create a safe home and community. The theme of Letts' book

is especially appropriate for the first year of the Oklahoma Reads Oklahoma project according to Susan McVey, director of the Oklahoma Department of Libraries (ODL).

“The One Book programs that have become popular in cities and states throughout the country are all about sharing a common experience and enriching our sense of community,” McVey said. “When different people come together to read and discuss the same book, it broadens their appreciation of the literature, and it gives them a safe place to discuss a variety of issues and controversies that may be addressed in the book.”

Anita May, executive director of the Oklahoma Humanities Council (OHC), said that Oklahoma’s One Book project is unique because it focuses on regional themes.

“Very early in the planning, we knew we wanted to tie-in to the state’s upcoming Centennial celebration,” May said. “The time leading up to our statehood birthday in 2007 offers an unprecedented opportunity to study our heritage and explore what it means to be an Oklahoman.”

For Billie Letts, the act of writing is a celebration of her Oklahoma heritage. “Whatever I write, my characters have the voice of Oklahoma, which lives inside my head,” she said. “I was born and raised here, so the music of our language and our culture resonates, I hope, in my stories.”

Letts has won two Oklahoma Book Awards and a Walker Percy Award. Her first novel, *Where the Heart Is*, was an Oprah Book Selection, and was made into a movie starring Natalie Portman and Ashley Judd. Despite previous recognition, the Oklahoma Reads Oklahoma news was an unexpected honor. “Several fine books were nominated, so

I was both surprised and delighted when I got the call that my book had been selected by readers,” she said.

In February, public librarians in the state will be attending workshops on planning discussion programs and other activities related to *The Honk and Holler Opening Soon*. In addition, Letts will begin making occasional appearances around the state. Her first stop was the Writers Workshop at the Muskogee Public Library earlier in January. She will also participate in the annual Oklahoma Library Association (OLA) Conference in her home town of Tulsa on April 15 and 16.

Letts’ media appearances include interviews on the state’s two book programs: *Writing Out Loud* on OETA, a production of the Center for Poets and Writers at Oklahoma State University–Tulsa; and *Read About It* on Cox Cable, a production of the Metropolitan Library System.

To hear Letts read a selection from *The Honk and Holler Opening Soon*, courtesy of KOSU Radio, visit www.okreads.ok.org on the world wide web.

The Oklahoma Humanities Council and the Oklahoma Department of Libraries are lead sponsors for Oklahoma Reads Oklahoma. Other sponsors include: The Eastern Oklahoma District Library System, Friends of Libraries in Oklahoma, KOSU Radio, Metropolitan Library System, Oklahoma Arts Council, Oklahoma Center for the Book, Oklahoma Center for Poets and Writers, Oklahoma Council for the Social Studies, Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English, Oklahoma Heritage Association, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma independent Booksellers, Oklahoma Library Association, Oklahoma Reading Association, Oklahoma State Department of Education, Oklahoma Today magazine, Pioneer Library System, State Regents for Higher Education, Tulsa

City-County Library System, Barnes and Noble Booksellers, and University of Oklahoma Press.

For more information on the statewide reading and discussion program, Oklahoma Reads Oklahoma, visit www.okreadsok.org.

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Attached: A look at the **Oklahoma Reads Oklahoma Voting Results** and **Billie Letts on Writing *The Honk and Holler Opening Soon***.

Oklahoma Reads Oklahoma: The Vote

During September and October of 2003, Oklahomans were invited to select the book they wished to read and discuss in 2004. Voting was recorded online at www.okreads.org. More than 1,600 visitors cast their votes. Here's the rundown. . .

1. The Honk and Holler Opening Soon, 33%, 534 votes
2. Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie, 21.6%, 349 votes
3. Shell Shaker, 18.8%, 303 votes
4. Way Down Yonder in the Indian Nation, 16.7%, 270 votes
5. (Tie) The Stricklands, 5%, 80 votes
5. (Tie) The Burning, 5%, 80 votes

Total Votes Cast: 1,616

Next fall, citizens will be given the opportunity to select the Oklahoma Reads Oklahoma book for 2005.

Billie Letts on Writing *The Honk and Holler Opening Soon*

Let me tell you a little about the writing of the "Honk," an experience which became a nightmare of sorts for me.

Where the Heart Is, my first book, had taken me two years to write, but I had no obligation and no deadline. All I had was a dream of being published. In contrast, the "Honk" came with a contract, a completion date, and a mountain of self-doubt that I could do it again. But, after all, I had written one novel, so I thought I knew "how" to write another one. Wrong!

Now I made it through the first ten chapters or so of the "Honk" without much trouble. Then, the bottom fell out. My writing just wasn't happening. As a result, I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep, thought I was going bald and convinced myself that an invisible creature was looking over my shoulder as I stared at blank pages, telling me I was only pretending to be a writer. He (I was convinced this demon was male) said the readers of my first book would hate this one.

In desperation, I went to a hypnotist who, after listening to me whine for half-an-hour, told me to finish my book first, then come back for a hypnosis session. (Guess he figured I was a lost cause until my hair started growing back.)

One of my friends sent me crystals which I dutifully pressed against my forehead every morning before I started writing. I asked my Higher Power for guidance, I gave up chocolate, I tried wearing a hat and writing in the nude.

But I was sick, sick, sick!

In an attempt to save what was left of my sanity, I left my home (with my husband's blessing) and my dogs (without theirs), ran away and lived in a different city for six months. I believed that solitude, living without TV, and staying in pajamas all day would get me going again. And finally, because of some kind of miracle (probably the pajamas and crystals cinched it), I started to work again.

I wrote the story of a Vietnam Vet named Caney Paxton, and a Native American woman, Vena Takes Horse; Bui Khanh, a Vietnamese man trying to find his place in America; and Molly O, an earth mother trying to save everyone, including her run-away daughter of seventeen.

All of these characters (real people to me), were looking for someone to love; someone to love them. And I was available.

Do I draw on people I've known, stories they've told? You bet! I really did know a man who ate a Vicks' sandwich when he was a boy, and I know a man who was

circumsized at age fifty-three, then taken on a punishing ride in the Oklahoma heat only hours after his surgery.

I had, in one of my college classes, a Vietnam Vet who fell from a helicopter; I knew a family in Durant named Takes Horse and a man named Soldier I met in Tahlequah. I stole the name Life from an obituary; and I actually taught a Vietnamese man named Bui to speak English.

But whatever I write, my characters have the voice of Oklahoma which lives inside my head. I was born and raised here, so the music of our language, our culture resonates—I hope—in my stories.