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- [New Tales of the South Anthology](#)
- [Submissions](#)

James Murray



Photo by Tom Barlow

Q & A: Serving Up Grit-Lit, Okie-Style: A Chat with James Murray

ASW: James Murray, welcome to The Truck. You are a fantastic writer, or author, whichever one you prefer, and I thank you much for sitting down with me to talk about your work. Let's start with the big picture. Tell us a little something about why you are drawn to the genre of working in the "grit-lit" mode?

I mostly read history and foreign fiction and just heard the term 'grit-lit' recently. I was just trying to write about people who don't get written about. To show a side of Oklahoma that doesn't get communicated. If I were following anyone's lead it would be Annie Proulx. I read her Wyoming stories and thought someone needed to do the same thing for Oklahoma. Someone who understood the state 'beyond the blacktop,' and I thought I was an eligible candidate for this task. Robert Conley's early story collection, *Witch Of*

Goingsnake, also meant a lot to me. But to my knowledge no one had written realistically about working class eastern Oklahoma in decades. Maybe someone has, but I wasn't aware of it.

ASW: In this issue, you share two tales with us: "June's Tale," and "Amanda's Tale." Both women are very sure of themselves and see their worlds so very clearly. In "June's Tale" the young girl who morphs into a Mother asks, "Was Grandpa a murderer?" Are there any writers, family members, etc. who inspired you to create such strong women in these two tales?

No one in particular. Most of my characters are composites. There was a recent report that female life expectancy is declining in certain eastern Oklahoma counties. Whatever lack of public voice men have in this culture, women have "less than." I certainly don't understand women the way I understand men, and that's probably why I like them more. The masculine world of indian/scots-irish action in eastern Oklahoma often excludes women so I try to write about them when I can.

ASW: That is cool; I'm glad that you do! "Painted Indians" is an especially gritty, terrific and horrific story with layers and layers of theme that oozes even more grit. Would you classify this as a "tale" or a "story?" Tale alludes to the dramatic; story to entertainment, in my lexicon. But please share with the Truckers your view of what you write—tale or story—and why?

I use the "tale" moniker probably because it was a way to avoid a title. "June's Tale," for example. It's also indicates a first person monologue. "Painted Indians," is definitely a "story" to me. The kind of story that someone might tell over coffee or beers, just written down.

ASW: Let's shift gears from James the short story writer to James the novelist, who collaborated with Deborah L. Duvall and Murv Jacob on the novel, Secret History of the Cherokees. I'd love it if you shared what this novel is about, and what brought you three together to write it?

With Secret History of the Cherokees, we wanted to write a kind of wild, well-researched, sensationalist historical fiction. One of our rules was - if it had been written about before, then we wouldn't write about it. Cherokee history, and historiography, is so vast five historical novels could be written about the same time period (1808-1863) and never cover the same ground. I met Murv and we became friends and gradually the plan took shape. We had a lot of arguments of course, but mostly it was a lot of fun. I think fun was the principle motivation. Some I wrote by myself, some Murv wrote by himself, and some Debbie wrote by herself. Also every possible collaborative combination. It's simpler to write by yourself, but not nearly as much fun. If ideology is shared, collaboration is the most fun way to write. With Secret History of the Cherokees, style wasn't so much of an issue because it jumps style, in a postmodern way. I like writing in different styles so that was never an issue for me.

ASW: You are the mystery man of Red Truck, James Murray. Do you want to tell us where you exist and how your postage stamp of the globe that you exist in impacts your writing style? (Of course, if you want to keep mum, we respect authorial privacy at the Truck.)

I live surrounded by woods in Cherokee County, Oklahoma. I have a very traditional working-class job (for now!) Of course, I think that living in what I call the "neo-frontier" has given me a good grasp of 19th century psychology and existence. A lot (most maybe?) "cowboy and indian" writers are very much products of middle class suburbs. Cormac McCarthy gets it, and Annie Proulx, too. Most writers underestimate the suffering and casual brutality factor because it's something they have never experienced but writers in the 19th century just took it for granted. I don't know if my surroundings affect my style, though, maybe they do.

My style teachers were Gore Vidal and Paul Bowles. When I think about the Okies who have influenced my writing I think of Merle Haggard and Woody Guthrie. Also Edward Anderson and Jim Thompson.

ASW: Share a strange fact you know about the state you live in and write about? I'll go first: I learned from my ten year old nephew, JD, that Oklahoma, where I live, has a "State Vegetable," which is okra. What is a weird fact you know about the state you live in? And dang, what state would this be?

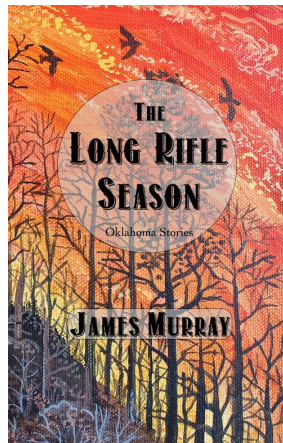
It's almost a truism - "every fact about Oklahoma is a weird fact." This is a very complex and chaotic state. As a history-buff guy, it's hard to pin down one. Recently I've been looking into the Cherokee-Osage war. No one apparently has ever written much about it. Claremore, Oklahoma is name after "Claremont's Mound," site of a Cherokee massacre of Osage in 1818, I think.

ASW: I never knew that! I wonder what work/s may be heading down the pike that we can look forward to from you in the future?

A short-story collection which includes the stories in Red Truck was published by Mongrel Empire Press in September 2014. I'm almost finished with a novel about Cherokee outlaw Ned Christie. After that will be a 'hip-hop noir' as I'm sick and tired of the 19th century.

ASW: Thanks James, for having this opportunity to visit with you. I'm sure Truckers will want to read, re-read, and read more of your works over and over again. I look forward to your new works.

Thank you very much. I appreciate your interest.



James Murray is a farmer, writer, and historian living in Cherokee County, Oklahoma. With Murv Jacob and Deborah L. Duvall, Murray co-wrote Secret History of the Cherokees which won the 2012 Best Historical Novel Award from Native Writers' Circle of the Americas. Murray's latest book is his short story collection, [Long Rifle Season](#), Mongrel Empire Press.

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