

# Kansas at 150: Where We've Been, Where We Are

## Kansas Humanities Council

### TALK Series

Outsiders may know us mostly as that place where Dorothy and Toto lived before the tornado swept them away, but Kansans know better. More than just the geographic center of the nation, Kansas provided a stage for many of the most dramatic episodes of American history.

Its buffalo-rich plains were homeland to a range of indigenous peoples – Kansa and Otoe, Osage and Kiowa, Arapaho and Pawnee, Comanche – before white contact and native resettlement transformed its population. Its edges touched by Lewis and Clark, Kansas was birthed as a state in the violent conflict between anti-slavery and pro-slavery forces that came to be called “Bloody Kansas,” a prelude to the nation’s civil war, a crucible of conflict that shaped such legendary figures as John Brown, William Quantrill, and Jesse James (who followed Quantrill for the sacking of Lawrence and learned a few lessons there). In the latter half of the nineteenth century, American Manifest Destiny played out on Kansas’s plains: crisscrossed first by pioneer trails (Santa Fe, Oregon, Chisholm), then by the major transcontinental railway lines (like the Kansas Pacific and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe), Kansas was opened up for the experience of the Old West, with all the buffalo hunters, Indian wars, cowboys, and gunslingers that go with it. In towns like Abilene and Dodge City, legendary figures like Wyatt Earp, Wild Bill Hickok, Bat Masterson, and John Wesley Harding made their names; beyond the cities, Buffalo Bill Cody and William Armstrong Custer gained their fame. Meanwhile, new groups of people, ranging from Exodusters escaping black oppression in the South to Mennonites looking for religious freedom and farmlands, from Mexicans working the rails to Italians working the mines, transformed the state’s population.

As a new century dawned, Kansas remained at the center of main currents in American history. Temperance advocate Carrie Nation took her hatchet to Kansas saloons. Political currents like progressivism and populism (so deeply associated with William Allen White, the “Sage of Emporia”) found strong roots in Kansas soil, while one of the early twentieth century’s most active socialist presses worked from the southeast Kansas ville of Girard (publishing *The Appeal to Reason* newspaper and the Little Blue Books series). Religious movements from the Social Gospel (sprung from Charles Sheldon’s famous question, “What would Jesus do?”) to Pentecostalism (developed in Topeka churches by Charles Parham) got their start in the state. It was from his clinic in Topeka that Karl Menninger remade psychiatric treatment in the United States and introduced Freudian ideas to America. The Kansas oil boom of the early twentieth century provided a start for Sinclair Oil, in Independence. As Amelia Earhart took her place as a pioneering woman aviator, Wichita became the center for a burgeoning new aerospace industry. Kansas was at the center of the ravagings of the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* provided the lead case for the Supreme Court’s dismantling of segregation in American schools in 1954, and the complex legal wranglings of Brown II and Brown III (1955-94) worked out the implementation of the court’s landmark decision.

Through the course of its history, Kansas has contributed significant figures to a wide range of American life: politicians (from Charles Curtis, the first Vice President with Native American blood, to Dwight Eisenhower, Alf Landon, and Bob Dole), artists (Aaron Douglas, John Steuart Curry, Gordon Parks), writers (Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Damon Runyon, William Inge, William Stafford; William Burroughs), and actors (from Buster Keaton, Louise Brooks, and Fatty Arbuckle in the silent era to Hattie McDaniels in the early days of sound to Dennis Hopper and Ed Asner today). True, many of them had to leave Kansas to make their names – Douglas and Hughes had to travel to New York to become part of the Harlem Renaissance; Louise Brooks had to go all the way to Berlin to become famous as Lulu, and most of the other actors all made their way west to Hollywood; Inge made his name on Broadway and in Hollywood; Burroughs followed the Beats’ path as far as Mexico and Morocco before coming home to Lawrence; Gordon Parks left Fort Scott behind to carve his pioneering legacy as African American photographer, writer, and director – but their Kansas roots inform them on their journeys.

A decade into another new century, Kansas continues to face challenges and opportunities: seeking to create new sources of economic growth in biotechnology and sustainable energy resources while preserving the last of the tall-grass prairie and struggling to maintain its small towns and agrarian base; facing new religious controversies from debates about evolution in the schoolrooms to the protests of Fred Phelps at military funerals; recovering from disasters like the Greensburg tornado by seeking new ways to develop, as in that city's embrace of "green" building technologies; and continuing to contribute new art, film, and literature. Following the state's 2011 sesquicentennial commemorating 150 years of Kansas, now is an apt occasion to take stock of where we have been, and where we are going. This TALK reading series is designed to contribute to that taking stock.

## **BOOKS IN THE SERIES**

*This TALK series is supported by a gift from the Washburn University, Center for Kansas Studies.*  
[www.washburn.edu/reference/cks](http://www.washburn.edu/reference/cks)

### ***It Happened in Kansas* by Sarah Smarsh**

Sarah Smarsh, who teaches creative non-fiction at Washburn University, provides an encapsulation of significant events and figures in Kansas's history in this work. The book ranges back to aboriginal Kansas peoples and Quantrill's raid and forward to William Burroughs's final days and Reverend Phelps and his minions. Her selection is always interesting, including towering figures like John Brown and unusual ones like the Bloody Benders and John Brinkley, the goat-gland doctor, and she delivers her history lessons with warmth and humor. 148 pp.

### ***Kansas Poems of William Stafford* edited by Denise Low**

William Stafford may have been named Oregon's poet laureate, but he was a Kansas boy at heart – born in Hutchinson, going to high school in Liberal, and college at the University of Kansas – and his youth in Kansas deeply inflected his poetry, as this collection of his work attests. "Mine was a Midwest home – you can keep your world," he proclaimed in the poem "One Home." Stafford's poetry is rooted in a sense of place, and the work in this collection shows how Kansas as a place continued to inform his thought and verse. The volume is collected and introduced by Kansas poet laureate Denise Low, and the new edition also incorporates interviews with Stafford and appreciations from over a dozen other writers. 210 pp.

### ***Now Let Me Fly* by Marcia Cebulka**

Topeka playwright Marcia Cebulka's play provides a clear and thorough treatment of the epochal case that ended school segregation in America. Framed as a crisis of conscience for lawyer Thurgood Marshall on the eve of the Supreme Court's hearing of the case and a debate with the ghost of his mentor Charles Houston, the play treats all five cases brought together in the Supreme Court decision and examining the grassroots activism that propelled the court actions. Commissioned by the Brown Foundation and Washburn University to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the decision in 2004, and based on extensive research and interviews with surviving protagonists of the five cases, the play has been performed in more than 5,000 venues in America and overseas. 65 pp.

### ***Ordinary Genius* by Thomas Fox Averill**

Readers familiar with KHC's other TALK programs may know Topekan Tom Averill's novels, *Secrets of the Tsil Café* and *The Slow Air of Ewan MacPherson*; other readers may know Averill's seminal contribution to Kansas literary history, *What Kansas Means to Me*, recently reissued in a twentieth-anniversary edition, or his on-line *Map of Kansas Literature*; still others may be familiar with his NPR persona, William Jennings Bryan Oleander, who offers commentaries from the fictional ville of Here, Kansas. But the short-story form has long been one of Averill's greatest strength, and this, his third and most recent story collection, represents Averill's work in the form at his best, and showcases as well his deep engagement with Kansas land, people, and history. 148 pp.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

### Grounding in Kansas history

Virgil Dean, ed. *John Brown to Bob Dole: Movers and Shakers in Kansas History* (2006).  
Nicole Etcheson. *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (2006).  
James F. Hoy. *Flint Hills Cowboys: Tales of the Tallgrass Prairie* (2006).  
Craig Miner. *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854-2000* (2002).  
Adaline Sorace and Deborah Sorace Putzman. *Addie of the Flint Hills: A Prairie Child during the Depression (1915-1935)* (2009).  
Kansas State Historical Society's Kansas Memory website <http://www.kansasmemory.org/> and their Territorial Kansas Online site <http://www.territorialkansasonline.org/~imlskto/cgi-bin/index.php>

### More from featured writers

Sarah Smarsh. *Outlaw Tales of Kansas* (2010).  
Sarah Smarsh's website <http://sarahsmarsh.wordpress.com/latest/>  
William Stafford. *West of Your City* (1960); *Traveling through the Dark* (1962); *Stories That Could Be True: New and Collected Poems* (1977); *Writing the Australian Crawl: Views on the Writer's Vocation* (prose, 1978); *You Must Revise Your Life* (prose, 1986); *The Darkness Around Us Is Deep: Selected Poems* (1993); *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* (1998), among other works.  
William Stafford on-line archive at <http://www.williamstaffordarchives.org/>  
Marcia Cebulska's website <http://marciacebulska.com> and the *Now Let Me Fly* website <http://nowletmefly.com/>  
Thomas Fox Averill. *Passes at the Moon* (stories, 1985); *Seeing Mona Naked* (stories, 1989), *William Jennings Bryan Oleander's Guide to Kansas: How You Know When You're Here* (essays in Averill's Oleander persona, 1996); *Leaving Midlin, Kansas: A Story in Postcards* (with Clark Britton, 1998); *Secrets of the Tsil Café* (novel, 2001); *The Slow Air of Ewan MacPherson* (novel, 2003).  
Thomas Fox Averill, ed. *What Kansas Means To Me: Twentieth-Century Writers on the Sunflower State* (1970).  
Averill's on-line *Map of Kansas Literature* at <http://www.washburn.edu/reference/cks/mapping/index.html> and the archive of William Jennings Bryan Oleander's commentaries at [http://www.washburn.edu/cas/english/taverill/oleander\\_archives.html](http://www.washburn.edu/cas/english/taverill/oleander_archives.html)

### Some classics of Kansas literature

L. Frank Baum. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900).  
Gwendolyn Brooks. *The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks* (2005).  
Truman Capote. *In Cold Blood* (1966).  
Maxine Clair. *Rattlebone* (1994).  
Bruce Cutler. *A West Wind Rises: The Marais des Cygnes Massacre* (1962).  
Langston Hughes. *Not Without Laughter* (1930).  
William Inge. *Four Plays: Come Back Little Sheba; Picnic; Bus Stop; The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* (1996).  
Meridel Le Sueur. *Ripening: Selected Works* (1990).  
William Leastheat Moon. *PrairieErth (A Deep Map)* (1991).  
Gordon Parks. *The Learning Tree* (1964).  
William Allen White. *Autobiography* (1946; revised, abridged edition, 1990).

### A sampling of contemporary Kansas poets

Cyrus Console. *Brief Under Water* (2008).  
Amy Fleury. *Beautiful Trouble* (2004).  
Steven Hind. *The Loose Change of Wonder* (2006).  
Ben Lerner. *Mean Free Path* (2010).  
Denise Low. *New and Selected Poems, 1980-1999* (1999).  
Denise Low, ed. *To the Stars: Kansas Poets of the Ad Astra Poetry Project* (2009).  
Eric McHenry. *Potscrubber Lullabies* (2006).  
Kevin Young. *Dear Darkness* (2010).