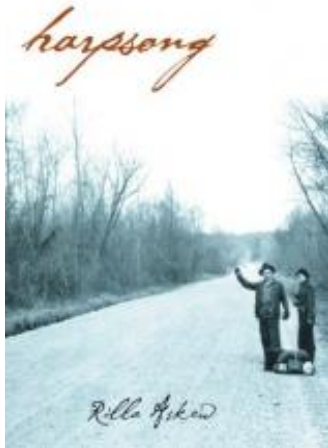


Harpsong

by Rilla Askew



About the Book

Harlan Singer, a gifted harmonica-playing troubadour, shows up in the Thompson family's yard one morning. He steals their hearts with his music, and their daughter with his charm. Soon he and his fourteen-year-old bride, Sharon, are on the road, two more hobos of the Great Depression, hitchhiking and hopping freights in search of an old man and the settlement of Harlan's long-standing debt.

The newlyweds don't head west in classic Dust-Bowl-to-California migration but careen around the Great Plains in a giant figure eight, with Oklahoma in the middle, "the squeezed-in hourglass place." The young couple's personal hardships play out against the backdrop of communal hardships of the era, as they appear in hobo jungles and Hoovervilles, rabbit drives and dust storms, bank robberies, cow killings, and the siege of a county courthouse by out-of-work miners and their families in the coal-mining district.

Through much of the novel Harlan is searching for a wandering hobo and spiritual philosopher, an old man named Profit, who once saved Harlan's life. Sharon longs to stop their ceaseless traveling, to return home to her family and settle down, but caught between the disruptive forces of the Great Depression and Harlan's obsession --- and her own powerful love for her husband--she can only follow along. After Harlan's ruthless beating by a railroad bull, his quest changes, and Sharon comes to a moment of reckoning: will she continue to wander through the wilderness with her profoundly gifted and, in all practical ways, useless husband, or will she follow her own wants and needs, walk away and leave him so that she can live some semblance of a normal life? Sharon's choice to go with her husband leads to the climactic scene in the Pittsburg County Courthouse that ultimately makes Harlan both a folk hero and a fugitive from the law with a price on his head.

Harpsong is told in three voices: *folksay*, the folktale-inflected, collective voice of the people of eastern Oklahoma; *Sharon*, who declares that no one knows the real story except "me here, Sharon, his wife;" and *deepsong*, the poetic, deep consciousness of Singer himself, whose source the reader understands only at the story's end. Employing an

elliptical narrative structure that turns back on itself, reflecting the paths of the young travelers as they roam the country in an infinity-sign figure eight, **Harpsong** explores themes of love and loss, sin and redemption, hope and hopelessness, what human beings ultimately owe one another, and the wayfaring orphan's search for home.

Discussion Guide

1. A novel set in Depression-era Oklahoma invites comparison with John Steinbeck's **Grapes of Wrath**. Compare the characters in **Harpsong** with the Joad family in Steinbeck's mythic novel. Compare and contrast the incidents in both novels. Where do Steinbeck's and Askew's themes seem to intersect or diverge? In what ways do they paint similar or differing portraits of Oklahomans in that era?
2. What is it about Harlan Singer that causes the people to talk about him and eventually claim him as a folk hero? Consider other characters in history, literature, or folktale with whom he might be compared. In what ways does Harlan's character justify how the people mythologize him, and in what ways does it not?
3. **Harpsong** is divided into three sections, told in three voices. Discuss the ways in which each voice renders a portion of the truth of the story. Where do the understandings of each voice contradict or deny one another?
4. The narrative structure in **Harpsong** is similar in Parts One and Two but changes dramatically in Part Three. Trace the structure of the novel, considering what the reader knows when and how that influences the reader's understanding of underlying themes.
5. Sharon narrates the majority of the novel. Of the three voices, is hers the one that tells the "real truth" about Harlan, as she claims? Why or why not? What does Sharon want in her life with Harlan? She speaks of "the third desire of [her] heart." What is that?
6. Discuss the themes of sin and redemption, hope and hopelessness that permeate the novel. What are the differences between Harlan and Sharon in terms of their understanding of sin? Of salvation?
7. What is Harlan's "sin" that so causes him to feel he needs redemption? How does he seek redemption? Does he achieve it in the end?
8. Discuss the old man's notion of "sixty-forty." Does the novel seem to indicate this is a fairly accurate proportion of good to evil, decency to cruelty, in humans?
9. What is the relationship between history and folktale in **Harpsong**? In America's ongoing narrative of itself? Discuss the impulse in people to create mythic heroes. Is the need greater in times of overwhelming despair, or do we continue to create larger-than-life heroes in good times as well as bad?
10. What historical events inform **Harpsong**? Consider which events are based in historical and geographical fact and which are a part of the folktale. Discuss the events in **Harpsong** in relation to oral histories handed down in readers' families that tell stories about the Great Depression.

Author Bio

Rilla Askew received a 2009 Arts and Letters Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She is the author of four novels, and has been nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Dublin IMPAC Prize, and is a three-time recipient of the Oklahoma Book Award.

Critical Praise

When Rilla Askew finished reading from the opening pages of her novel **Harpsong** at last month's Centennial Voices event, my wife turned to me and said, "OK. I'm hooked." She wasn't the only one, to be sure. Askew is a writer whose prose almost begs to be read out loud. It's an incantatory mix of down-home directness and high-flying poetry, the sound of plain-spoken people whose voices have been steeped in the language of the King James Bible. It is a fictional voice that has earned Askew deserved comparisons to William Faulkner and Cormac McCarthy. And it finds maybe its best expression in **Harpsong**. It is...a novel about faith --- not simply religious faith, although that is a large part, but faith in people, in the land, in the need and even comfort that can be found simply in keeping on? Singer is after some sort of truth, a way of making the Bible he's read and had recited to him have meaning in a world that has lost its hope? It is a story that moves with the ease and inevitability of a country stream, and lingers in the mind like a melody.?

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