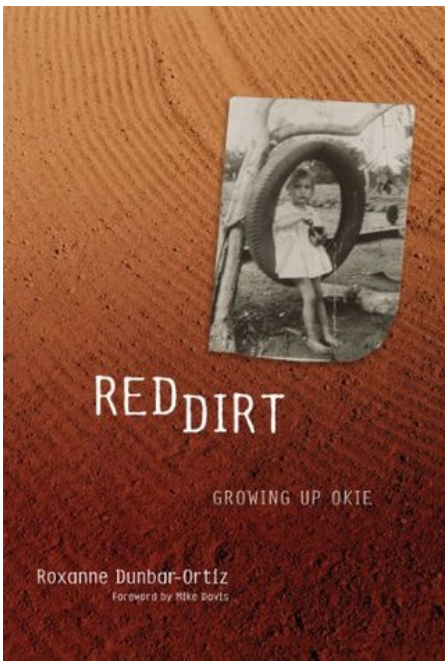

Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz , Mike Davis (Foreword by)

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A classic in contemporary Oklahoma literature, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *Red Dirt* unearths the joys and ordeals of growing up poor during the 1940s and 1950s. In this exquisite rendering of her childhood in rural Oklahoma, from the Dust Bowl days to the end of the Eisenhower era, the author bears witness to a family and community that still cling to the dream of America as a republic of landowners.

Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie Details

Date	:	Published February 13th 2006 by University of Oklahoma Press (first published 1997)
ISBN	:	9780806137759
Author	:	Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz , Mike Davis (Foreword by)
Format	:	Paperback 228 pages
Genre	:	Autobiography, Memoir, Nonfiction, History, Biography Memoir, Social Movements, Social Justice, Feminism, Politics

From Reader Review Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie for online ebook

Giovanna Cuellar says

If you want to read a self aggrandizing memoir about a white woman complaining about being "dark" and claiming "Indian" ancestry with no proof, plus seemingly coming off as post racial - here you go. I only finished this because I was stuck on an airplane.

Sezín Koehler says

A brilliant memoir by a friend of mine from my UN days in Geneva. While nothing at all like my mother's life, it reminded me so much of her and made me think about what stories my mother would tell if she sat down and started writing out her life from the very beginning. All the amazing, horrible, wonderful things.

Keri says

I read this as an "in between book" - between other books when I just needed to fill some reading time with a book I wasn't committed to. Thank goodness! This is the second memoir type story I've read in the last month that has left me so disappointed.

I thought I would enjoy this book if not for any reason other than the references to my home state, along with several family generations, of Oklahoma. Throughout most of the book, I kept wondering which Oklahoma she was referring to, because the one she presents is not the one I know. Nor the Oklahoma I've been told of from much older family members, from Land run days to the dust bowl to the civil rights era to present day.

Yes, Oklahoma has prejudices, of all kinds, including class. But I don't believe these exist only in Oklahoma or in a greater degree there.

Her tone is whiny with an undercurrent of anger. I am very unimpressed with her memories and her reasoning. I could have filled my time better.

Ryan Mishap says

Growing up Okie, this memoir is engaging, enlightening, and infused with historical/political outlook and awakening. The best memoirs are from partisans who aren’t afraid to look at their own life’s history and discuss relevant political/social issues. She traces her early years, ancestors, the pain and confusion of growing up in a land of class, race, and gender divisions/dilemas, conflicts, and paradoxes. Recommended, yeah.

Dale says

More like 3.5 stars. I'm a huge fan of her work, but not of this memoir. It seems to jump all over the place at points, with some segments seemingly being left unresolved to the point where it's confusing. I still think there are a lot of great little stories in here and I did enjoy reading about her journey growing up in Oklahoma, as I have ancestors who were Oakies, but I wouldn't recommend this book to anyone due to it's sporadic nature.

Ciara says

this is the first of roxanne dunbar-ortiz's "how i became a radical" trilogy, all about growing up poor in oklahoma, being an indian, marrying young, taking off to california, discovering that her husband is kind of a total asshole, going to college, facing anti-okie prejudice, coming to terms with her indian heritage, & eventually deep-sixing the crummy husband in pursuit of higher education, feminism, self-actualization, & other dudes who seem a little cooler. i am probably focusing too much on marriage/california/college. i do think most of the book took place in oklahoma when dunbar-ortiz was a kid. i just don't remember too many details about it because it seems like it was just chapter after chapter of establishing that the family was poor, that indians were discriminated against, that dunbar-ortiz was authentically okie. worthy causes for the sake of narrative function, to be sure, but i guess i am not that into this constant quest for "authenticity" in oppression narratives, you know? i think that was my main issue with without a net, & pretty much all of michelle tea's stuff, & some other books i was lukewarm on. i felt like the author was working too hard to prove their deprivation to me, when i probably wouldn't have picked up the book if i wasn't already inclined to believe their version of events. i don't like feeling brow-beaten, you know? this is an on-going problem in all of dunbar-ortiz's narratives, which i addressed a bit in my review of blood on the border--the way she is kind of grinding an axe instead of writing a book, at times. we get it, okay? save it for your diary. but it was still a pretty good book & i was psyched to find it (i think it's been re-issued, but i was looking for it in the weird period between the first printing & right before the success of outlaw woman & subsequent re-prints).

Donavan says

I picked this book up by chance in an indy bookstore in Natchez. Reading it prompted me to start writing a book I'd had in mind for about six months previous. I'd begun thinking about homecoming and rural culture since reading Sebald's Vertigo and McMurtry's Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen. I wanted to write about my own homecoming, a visit to the farm in Oklahoma I grew up on. I started writing my book at a coffee shop in Natchez and I'm still working on it. It's called Red Neck. Little Roxy's Red Dirt was the third part of tripod on which Red Neck stands.

Becky says

An autobiography of a woman born in Oklahoma in 1938 during the depths of the Depression. She tells how the rural poor in Oklahoma lived through those hard years, and how she eventually left the state to become a professor in CA. She recounts the populist history of Oklahoma, mourning the loss of that social movement. The book would be better except for two problems. First, the author is somewhat whiney and sorry for

herself. Having a mother who went through much worse and never complained, I find her whining bothersome. Secondly, I feel that the author's arguments would be strengthened if she presented them less emotionally, more even-handedly.

Mike says

I chose to read this book because of Okie. My bloodlines pass through Oklahoma and several of the subjects mentioned in her book (California, Dust Bowl, great depression) played roles in my family's life. The author's story is not unique to Oklahoma and could have occurred in any of the plains states. Thus there is nothing, at least from my read of this book, that makes Okie a causual relationship to growing up. This book then is part: 1.the story of a child of tenant farmers growing up in poverty, 2. discourse on social justice, and 3. treatise on the evils of capitalism.

You have to be aware of the author's politics when reading the book, because they do creep in.

I am glad I read the book, but you have to be really really really really interested in Oklahoma history to pick this book up.

Craig Werner says

The first piece of Dunbar-Ortiz's memoirs, Red Dirt describes her childhood and early adult years growing up in Oklahoma. It's a complex heritage, which involves both her Wobbly grandfather and the Red Scare, all complicated by her mother's racial heritage--a bit of Indian, but culturally almost entirely "white." Aware that her people are seen as Okies, white trash, Dunbar-Ortiz isn't presented with any easy paths out, but by the end of the novel, aided by an inspirational teacher, an uncle who identifies himself as a socialist, and a growing stack of bucks, she's on the verge of breaking away. At times, Red Dirt reads like what James Baldwin described in another context as "the usual bleak childhood fantasy." But the political undercurrents and the clarity of the writing makes it worth the read.

Bart says

The first part in Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz' autobiographical trilogy, Red Dirt is an honest and interesting portrayal of a semi-ordinary (I don't think that child abuse, parental addiction to alcohol, etc. are uncommon) Okie girl's childhood. Alone, Red Dirt is okay, as part of a trilogy, essential for better understanding of Dunbar-Ortiz' more interesting parts.

Dalton Funkhouser says

This is important for Oklahomans. I think that we are all familiar with the various aspects of our statehood, but no one tells the stories. Roxanne does that for us. She gives voice to an unspoken past, the experience of the small-town Okie. Sure, there are novels describing the experience, but this is the first book I have read that gives a first-hand account of "Growing up Okie". Working back from her experience as a professor in

California, Roxanne attempts to untangle the threads of her upbringing: her Wobbly grandfather; her sharecropping father; the Red Scare. The account moves quickly, leaving out many details and not allowing for explication. Maybe that is praise for many people, a mostly experiential account. I would have loved more thinking through each of the experiences, though. Perhaps if I knew more about her current work I would appreciate this memoir more.

Sandra D says

As a lifelong Oklahoman of Cherokee descent, I often wonder what the hell my damn state's problem is. This same state produced me and my parents and my siblings and WE AREN'T LIKE THAT.

I could go off on an extended tirade about what it's like to be a tiny blue fish in a red, red sea, but instead I'll just recommend that, if you also wonder what the hell is wrong with Oklahoma, you read this book as it offers substantial clues.

Finn says

i've been on a kick of reading memoirs written by other working class women. these memoirs tend to all have this similar feel to them. i can't quite explain it, but the way people ponder their relationships with and perceptions of their mother or father all have a similar feel to them. i guess it could be a complaint, but i hear my own voice in the pages almost. that's why i read it.
i think this memoir is special because of her reflections on how her white community (and more broadly white working class communities in general in the US) are dooped into taking on racist and xenophobic characteristics, but have in the past been revolutionaries. and the future needs them to become revolutionaries again.

Pamela says

It pains me to give less than three stars to a memoir/biography; especially from one native Oklahoman to another. No matter one’s roots, a person’s life story always has worth whatever it entails. Whether or not I agree with someone’s ideologies, spiritual beliefs, or lifestyle choices is a minuscule point when it comes to critical evaluation and/or overall reading enjoyment.

Therefore, let me make clear, my less than satisfactory rating reflects more upon mechanics, formatting, writing style, and general tone, than Dunbar’s life experiences and/or worldviews and/or political affiliations.

The quality of writing is passable, but it lacks cohesiveness, congruent structure, and fluidity. Often, in the middle of recounting a childhood experience, Dunbar would suddenly switch to some remotely connected thought and take off in a whole different vein; never finishing the original story. One example in particular was exceptionally bizarre:

Dunbar and a girlfriend were speeding down a dusty dirt road near Piedmont, Oklahoma (her hometown), when the friend lost control of the car and crashed into a dry-wash gully. Dunbar goes into graphic detail of flying through the windshield, nearly severing her arm at the elbow, blood gushing, walking to a nearby farm

house, catching a ride home, soaked in blood. And then, while being rushed to the hospital by her father and brother, Dunbar suddenly breaks into a lament (one of many throughout the latter half of the book) about how abusive, crass, and uncaring her late-life-alcoholic mother was…..

Did they have to amputate Dunbar's arm? If not, did she retain use of it? Did it leave traumatic scars, physically or emotionally? How long was she in the hospital? Did anyone send flowers? Did her mother ever come to visit?

Who knows – she never finished the story.

Another problem I had was the lack of ebb-and-flow between historical inserts and Dunbar's personal story. One minute I'd be reading about her dirt poor upbringing, and the next I'd be reading about the Green Corn Rebellion, then suddenly a story about country music would join the fray; without benefit of division – spatial, textual, symbolic, or otherwise. Then, perhaps, three pages later she would pick up the original story thread.

Lastly, aside from the historical information (which was generally interesting though subjective), Dunbar's tone was exceptionally bitter, negative, and defensive. Mindsets I try to steer away from. It's my belief that what one dwells upon at great length is what one brings to pass in great measure. There's enough negativity in the world without creating new hatreds from old hurts. Yes, it's important to acknowledge/address less than lovely issues (personal, political, societal, or whatever). Otherwise, nothing would change. But typically, it's 'how' something is said, not 'what' is said that creates animosity and division. And that's where Dunbar and I didn't mesh.

Two Stars, with some three-star moments.
