

## ***The Barnstormers* – a screenplay inspired by the history of oil, early aviation, and clashing cultures in 1920s Oklahoma**

Beth LaDow

*Pioneering aviatrix and intrepid badass Sallie Tiger must team up with a roguish rival, all while weighing the independent life she loves against her beloved Creek grandmother's "old ways," to stand up to a brazen oil developer plotting America's first act of aerial terrorism against the brown and black people in his way.*

In the early twentieth century, two developments -- commercial aviation and the exploitation of vast oil reserves -- profoundly changed American society's relationship with the natural environment, and they intersected in the new state of Oklahoma (Indian Territory until 1907) in dramatic ways. I am writing a screenplay about the battle for oil on an explosive multi-racial frontier, featuring the Creek Indian/African-American aviatrix Sallie Tiger, inspired by the life of pilot Bessie Coleman. Sallie, recently back from Europe as the first licensed female pilot of color, expects a happy return to her hometown of Tulsa as the star of a troupe of "barnstormers," who perform jaw-dropping aerial tricks with surplus WWI planes to astounded first-time audiences. Sallie loves flying -- her "wild child" love of animals transferred to a Curtiss JN-4 bi-plane -- a passion that Talisa ("beautiful water"), the midwife Creek grandmother and formidable tribal leader who raised her, cannot understand. But when Sallie discovers that her grandmother may quietly make a land deal with oil man J.D. St. Clair in order to give her granddaughter the proceeds so she will stop flying before she gets killed, Sallie finds herself drawn into a local race war, where white supremacy and control of the land and millions in oil revenue are all at stake. To complicate matters, Sallie's black/Indian benefactor, newspaper publisher Buck Robinson, and Tulsa's African-American Greenwood district (America's "Black Wall Street") are also targets. When the white population seizes an opportunity to foment the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, a massacre complete with aerial bombing, Sallie must defy her grandmother, rally the barnstormers, and join forces with "WWI Ace-For-Hire" Ty Caliber to stop the oil interests and a corrupt police force before they destroy Greenwood.

My aim is to create an action/adventure drama with fresh and surprising characters, where contradictory human values play out around a prized natural resource and a technology that changes our perspective on the earth. While a raft of outstanding environmental-themed documentaries have reached large audiences in recent years, fewer popular mainstream dramas (excluding "disaster" movies) convey the same themes -- fewer still with the sophisticated historical backdrop of *Chinatown* (1974), which re-tools the history of California's water wars to create a powerful portrait of environmental injustice and human failing. As my script takes shape, I hope to explore how popular cinema can capture complex human-and-nature relationships, in broad themes and in the details that tell the story.