

# Baja Oklahoma Short Guide

## Baja Oklahoma by Dan Jenkins

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# Characters

The center of the novel is Juanita Hutchins, one of the world's survivors.

Her first marriage ends when she finds her husband with another woman, and he gives her the choice to believe "me or your own eyes." A second marriage ends in a similar way. Juanita works in the bar, worries about her daughter who has run off with a cocaine dealer, deals with her hypochondriac mother, and writes country songs. She watches the customers' antics with humor and tolerance, carries on a careful romance with a regular customer, Slick Henderson, and polishes her songs, never doubting her talent, only her chances.

Slick, an Exxon station mechanic, who spends most of his working days in Herb's Cafe, is Juanita's faithful admirer. His history is similar to hers: failed marriages, a marginal existence.

He is the formulator and chief practitioner of "Mankind's Ten Stages of Drunkenness," which begins with "Witty and Charming" and "Rich and Powerful" and ends with "Invisible" and "Bulletproof." Yet he is steady in his devotion to Juanita; he believes in her talent, shares her distrust in luck.

The other characters who inhabit the novel are the bar's regulars — eccentric Texan characters. They drift in, recount the latest disaster of their lives, laugh it off, and take their leave.

Although he makes only one appearance, an important character in the novel is country and western singer Willie Nelson. He is in a very real way the moral standard by which Juanita measures everything; he is a success without compromising his roots in Western Swing. At the novel's conclusion, Juanita gets a chance to perform her song "Baja Oklahoma" with a band that is playing at a Willie Nelson concert. In a wild example of wish fulfillment, Willie Nelson walks on stage and sings it with Juanita.

## Social Concerns/Themes

Baja Oklahoma is something of an anomaly; while recognizably the work of Dan Jenkins, its social concerns are different from those of *SemiTough* (1972) and Jenkins's other novels. Set in Herb's Cafe, a Fort Worth bar, the novel deals with the place of a woman in a culture completely dominated by masculine values. *Baja Oklahoma* examines the social position and possibilities of a twice-divorced, middle-aged waitress in a blue-collar bar; at first and even second glance, it is not a position anyone would choose to occupy. The novel presents the social milieu of the bar in realistic, comic detail — the camaraderie of a group of regulars who drink too much, talk dirty, meet their lovers, bet wild sums of money on whatever football game interests them, and argue the merits of country music. It is not an easy way to make a living; Jenkins's heroine survives by possessing the Texan values and virtues she shares with Billy Clyde Puckett of *Semi-Tough*: humor, cynicism, and a kind heart.

An important theme of the novel is the saving power of dreams. In an atmosphere that seems to preclude the possibility of worldly success, Jenkins's characters survive and, indeed, succeed through a combination of toughness and luck. Occasionally, beneath the general hilarity, the reader hears a quiet conversation between a customer and the waitress that reveals their mutual pain over children gone wrong.

They endure with grace because of their dreams of a better day. Jenkins's heroine, seemingly caught in her limited world, dreams of being a songwriter, carrying on the Fort Worth tradition of Western Swing; with humor and toughness, she works to make her dream reality.

## Techniques

Like all Jenkins's fiction, *Baja Oklahoma* has the loosely-constructed plot of romance. Set for the most part in the bar, the action is determined by who walks in or out the door. Nevertheless, there is a clear movement toward the moment at the concert that makes Juanita a star and allows her to leave the bar to seek out new adventures.

This episodic structure allows Jenkins to use his characters as mouthpieces to hold forth on subjects that interest him. The characters, particularly Juanita and Slick, articulate certain values and ways of viewing modern society that are idiosyncratic, profane, clear-sighted and sane — and Jenkins's own.

# Adaptations

The 1988 film adaptation, made for HBO, starred Lesley Ann Warren, Peter Coyote, Swoosie Kurtz, and Billy Vera, as well as cameo appearances by Willie Nelson and Emmylou Harris. The film is faithful to the novel's plot and spirit.



## Literary Precedents

Baja Oklahoma claims the same literary precedents as all of Jenkins's fiction: the traditions of comedy and satire and the conventions of Southwestern idiom and values. Additionally, this novel owes much to the conventions of country-and-western song lyrics. Jenkins brings to his novel the traditional subject matter of those lyrics: cheating, love gone wrong, and a profound sense of self as somehow different because Southern.



# Copyright Information

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