

The Luck of Texas McCoy Short Guide

The Luck of Texas McCoy by Carolyn Meyer

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Overview

The Luck of Texas McCoy is the story of a self-reliant, independent girl who discovers that, in the end, we all need each other, and that accepting help is not a sign of weakness, but part of the human condition. Texas's fierce independence is very appealing, and her struggle to carry out her grandfather's wishes and to make his ranch once again prosperous and thriving shows what determination and hard work can achieve. She also learns that lucky breaks are given to anyone who tries, and that compassion and integrity are their own rewards. Yet the most difficult lesson Texas must learn is to accept others as they are, to allow herself to trust others, and to let her defenses down.

About the Author

Carolyn Meyer was born on June 8, 1935, in Lewistown, Pennsylvania, and graduated in 1957 with a bachelor's degree in English from Bucknell University. Following an earlier desire to write, she sold her first story to a secretarial magazine, and then wrote a series of craft books for children, ranging from sewing and needlework to candy making and cooking. In 1978 she published her first novel for young people, *C. C. Poindexter*.

In 1960 she married Joseph Smrcka.

Now divorced, she has three sons, Alan, John, and Christopher.

Setting

The open ranch country of New Mexico is the setting of this novel. Texas is growing up on her grandfather's rundown ranch and shares his dream of rehabilitating the debt-ridden and unproductive land. Neither her widowed mother, her younger sister, nor her grandmother share this dream. To them life in the city appears much more comfortable and appealing. When grandpa dies, leaving his ranch to Texas, the family pressures her to sell it so they can move, but Texas knows that this is not what grandpa wanted, and she stubbornly refuses, staying behind when her mother and grandmother leave for town.

Texas has not only inherited her grandfather's estate; she is also heir to his stubbornness and prejudices, such as the feud with some Mexican neighbors whom grandpa believed to have designs on his land. Texas is only too willing to continue the quarrel, and she distrusts the friendly overtures of their teen-age son.

The harsh but beautiful landscape of New Mexico is a fitting background for this story, since Texas shares many qualities with the uncompromising, dry, and forbidding country and weather. Only a strong person can succeed in wrestling a living from this land.



Social Sensitivity

The Luck of Texas McCoy carries a strong social message to the reader. No matter how desperate and down on his luck a person may be, he has worthwhile qualities that give him dignity and purpose. Poor abandoned Sandy becomes a better caretaker and confidante to Texas than Texas's own mother ever was. Frightened little TJ has wonderful rapport with all living creatures, and Texas herself shows courage and determination in trying to save her run-down ranch.

As Texas learns, prejudices can get in the way of really seeing people. In carrying on her grandfather's senseless grudge, Texas falsely accuses, and consistently rebuffs Pete and his warm and generous Mexican neighbor family.

Only when she is ready to admit her own errors and to open her mind, does she see them for the friends they are and can be.



Literary Qualities

Like many novels for teen-agers, *The Luck of Texas McCoy* is a story of growth and maturing. It is easy for a teen-age reader to sympathize with Texas since in many ways she is a typical teen-ager herself. True, few young people are in a position where they are in almost total control of their lives, but Texas's fierce independence and efforts to manage her own destiny without the help of adults are qualities that are shared by the age group. The author has created a very likable heroine, with attitudes and characteristics that are totally believable.

Aside from the maturing experiences of Texas, and her realization that she is part of a world and not a loner, the main theme running through the story is one of "do unto others as you want them to do to you." Helping poor, stranded Sandy is a kindness that is repaid to Texas many times over. Letting shy little TJ train her horses to give him back self-confidence gives Texas a valuable helper on the ranch, and assisting Tommy in overcoming his fear of riding gains her a much needed friend.

Carolyn Meyer's casual style captures the language of the young people as well as the people of the small New Mexico town, and lends authenticity to the setting and descriptions. The reader gets a realistic picture of the modern west, and the hard work and sacrifice that go into running a ranch.



Themes and Characters

Texas McCoy, the main character, is stubborn and independent—a born loner, who prefers to live in an old adobe house rather than share a home with her sloppy mother and sister. After her grandfather dies, her grandmother, mother, and younger sister move into town, leaving Texas to fend for herself. They are certain that lack of money will soon force her to give in and join them. Texas desperately tries to raise the necessary funds to save the ranch but is unable to do so on her own.

It is ironic that just when things look hopeless, help is offered by other people. All her life, Texas has tried to solve her own problems, and she hates to depend on anyone. Nevertheless, the offer from a movie company for a portion of her land solves the most pressing monetary problems.

Yet the real "luck" of Texas comes in the form of two very unlikely characters. The first is Sandy, a lost waif of a girl who is stranded in a broken-down station wagon on Texas's ranch. Even though Sandy and her little boy TJ have been abandoned by her callous boyfriend, and she is pregnant and destitute, she is touchingly optimistic, believing that everything will turn out well in the end. Texas considers her hopelessly naive, yet it is Sandy who supports Texas in her various crises in a way her family never has. She turns out to be a remarkable homemaker and cook, and she changes the bleak and neglected farm house into a pleasant home, bringing much needed order and stability into Texas's life. Her little boy TJ has an amazing gift for handling and understanding animals and becomes a valuable help with her horses.

Moreover, he trains the less flashy but intelligent colt Freckles whom Texas has overlooked. In doing so, he teaches Texas a lesson about looking beyond the surface, something which she rarely does even where people are concerned. Both Sandy and TJ help Texas realize that being dependent is not a weakness.

The second lucky break comes in the person of Tommy, the movie star and teen idol whose company buys a parcel of the ranch to make a cowboy movie.

Tommy is handsome, debonair, and afraid of horses, a definite problem for a cowboy star. Texas is hired to teach Tommy how to ride well enough to appear in the film. Again, she discovers to her surprise that stereotypes are not necessarily true. The Hollywood star turns out to be a good friend and really nice person. He, like Sandy, helps break down Texas's defenses and teach her that people are not always what they at first seem, and that getting to know them is worth the effort.

Pete, Texas's teen-age neighbor, is initially the target of her anger. Texas shares her grandfather's suspicion that Pete and his family are trying to steal her ranch, and she refuses to accept any friendly gestures. When her favorite colt dies, it is Pete who, in her eyes, becomes the prime suspect for causing its death. Eventually, however, she begins to realize that he, too, would like to be a friend if she would allow him to be one.



The cast of characters is rounded out by several minor but colorful local types. There are Riggs, banker and dog lover, who takes a fatherly interest in Texas's affairs; Hoss and Luann, owners of the Whole Donut, a greasy teenage hangout where Texas has a short, unsuccessful career as a waitress; Missy, her star-struck younger sister; Loretta, her lazy and sloppy mother; and the whole crew of a movie company, including the glamorous star Dana whom Texas dislikes instantly.

They all, at one time or other, invade Texas's self-sufficient, lonely life, and help her realize that nobody is so perfect or self-assured that he or she may not use a helping hand.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why is the title of the book *The Luck of Texas McCoy*, rather than *The Troubles of Texas McCoy*? What sort of luck does she have?
2. The real name of the main character is Melanie Sue. Why does she change it? What is the significance of the name Texas? What does it show about her personality?
3. Texas's grandfather tells her that she has to be realistic and face facts, and not be like her mother and sister.

Yet he, too, has dreams. How do they differ from what his wife and daughter want?
4. Besides Texas and her grandfather there are several other characters who have a dream. Who are they? Are their dreams realistic?
5. When TJ first arrives at the ranch, he does not talk. What makes him start to talk again? Is it significant?
6. Texas has strong opinions and ideas about other people such as Tommy, Pete, and the movie crew. Her conclusions frequently turn out to be wrong. On what does she base her judgment about people, and why does it often mislead her?
7. What does Pete mean when he tells Texas that his mother always says "a little door will open"?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. There are two types of dreamers in the novel. On the one hand, there are Texas's mother, grandmother, and sister who long for a comfortable life; and on the other hand there are Texas and her grandfather. How do their dreams differ? How do they go about fulfilling them? What does this reveal about their personalities?

2. Sandy is an important character in the novel. What type of person is she?

Is she a dreamer, too? What is her purpose in the story?

3. Characters are built up from incidents. Which incidents in this novel shed a light on Texas's character, and what do they reveal?

4. The colt Easter is important to Texas, yet he dies. And Sandy and Tommy leave at the end of the novel.

With all these things happening, how can the author talk about the "luck" of Texas McCoy? Is it really luck or do the characters create their lucky breaks?

5. Does Carolyn Meyer's description of life on a western ranch fit the popular image seen in TV westerns? What is different?

For Further Reference

"Carolyn Meyer." Booklist 81 (Summer 1984): 59. This is an evaluative review of the novel.

Carpenter, John. New Mexico. Chicago: Children's Press, 1978. An introduction to the land and people of New Mexico.

"The Luck of Texas McCoy." School Library Journal 36 (Fall 1985): 86. This is a brief review of the book as part of a series of novels dealing with young people forced to become independent.



Related Titles

Texas McCoy rebels against the stereotypical female role models that she sees in her mother and older sister. A similarly rebellious character is the heroine of *A Rumour of Otters* (1986) by Deborah Savage, a New Zealand author. Alexa, like Texas, is a girl growing up on a ranch, in a world where female roles are stereotyped. Like Texas, she rebels and sets out on a lonely trip through the wilderness in search of some mythical otters. Her strength of character and perseverance lead her to success. Another strong, female character growing up in a rural area is found in Lynn Hall's *Denison's Daughter*, the story of a teenager who succeeds in her dream of becoming a blacksmith.

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