

# Strawberry Girl Short Guide

## Strawberry Girl by Lois Lenski

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## Overview

The United States is so large that people in one part of the country sometimes have difficulty understanding people in other parts. Lenski's regional books explore the differences in climate, food, dialect, and work that characterize different regions. In *Strawberry Girl* the personality of Birdie Boyer comes alive, and the reader understands how a girl from early twentieth-century rural Florida might have lived, thought, and felt. The book is richly illustrated by the author. Her black-and-white drawings accurately portray the region and complement the straightforward text.

## About the Author

Lois Lenore Lenski was born on October 14, 1893, in Springfield, Ohio, the daughter of a Lutheran minister and a former schoolteacher. She grew up in a small town in Ohio, the fourth of five children in a family that placed a high value on education and religion. After graduating from Ohio State University with a teacher's degree, she pursued a career in art. For four years she studied at the Art Students League in New York, working odd jobs to pay living expenses.

She painted greeting cards, made fashion drawings for ads, clerked at a gift shop, and worked for one of her teachers, Arthur Covey, helping him with mural paintings. During this time in New York, she sold illustrations for four softcover children's coloring books.

The following year she studied at the Westminster School of Art in London, and it was at this time that she began illustrating hardcover books.

Two weeks after returning from her year in London, in 1921, Lenski married her former teacher, the widower Arthur Covey. During the first years of her marriage, she cared for her two stepchildren, making time for her own artistic work and attending art classes on Saturdays. Lenski hoped to illustrate books written by other people. When she showed her drawings to a New York editor, the editor said she had no manuscripts at that time to fit them but suggested that Lenski write a story of her own.

In 1927, Lenski published her first book, *Skipping Village*, the story of her childhood in Ohio. *A Little Girl of 1900* followed in 1928, also chronicling her childhood. After completing picture books for her son, Stephen, she turned to writing historical novels for young adults, doing extensive research in libraries and courthouses. Although her historical novels were well received, Lenski grew tired of the research necessary to gather material and turned instead to writing contemporary regional stories.

By visiting different parts of the United States, drawing pictures of people and places, and listening to local speech patterns, Lenski was able to capture regional life in words. Her first regional novel, *Bayou Suzette*, set in Louisiana, won the Ohioana Medal in 1944. In 1946 *Strawberry Girl* won the Newbery Medal. Another regional novel, *Judy's Journey*, won the Child Study Association of America Children's Book Award in 1947. In all, Lenski wrote seventeen regional books, each presenting a realistic picture of life among poorer people.

During her career, Lenski wrote a hundred books for children and illustrated them all herself. She also illustrated another fifty books written by other authors. She died on September 11, 1974, in Tarpon Springs, Florida, two years after publishing her autobiography.

## Setting

The story takes place in the early 1900s in the Florida backwoods. This is strawberry country; school runs through the summer months but closes during berry picking season in January, February, and March. Most of Birdie Boyer's time is spent at home, working in the berry patch, doing housework, taking care of her younger siblings, or studying. Birdie is proud, as are her neighbors, to be a "Cracker"—a Florida native—and not a Yankee from up north. The town closest to Birdie's home boasts an open town square with a railroad depot on one side and houses and shops along the other sides. Going to town is an event that requires a ride in the mule-drawn wagon.

## Social Sensitivity

American society has changed so much since the publication of *Strawberry Girl* that attitudes acceptable in those times may now be offensive. Although Lenski writes sympathetically about the rural poor and has captured much flavor of the region, she is a privileged outsider who presents characters as stereotypes. The problems that these poor people face are the direct result of character flaws, rather than of circumstances. Lenski seems to believe that anyone who works hard and has faith in God will lead a good life. Contemporary readers may find this belief not only naive but the product of an elitist mind.

For this reason, *Strawberry Girl* should be read as a "period piece." It was not until after World War II that most Americans began to acknowledge the existence of its minorities, its poor, and its uneducated. The novel provides an excellent view of the way Americans once thought, and should provoke stimulating discussions about how a society changes.

## Literary Qualities

Regional stories have a long heritage in American literature. The earliest books written in America were regional ones explaining explorations in Virginia or hardships in New England. As the country expanded westward, stories of the new regions fascinated readers, and pockets of American literature developed in various territories. Place, more than time, became the essential ingredient in American fiction, especially in literature about the American South. The southern novel moves slowly through time and, unlike the western novel, puts less emphasis on plot and action than on place and characters.

Lenski, who said she wanted to depict different regions accurately, has incorporated some characteristics of the southern novel in *Strawberry Girl*.

Using the characters' dialect to establish the region's isolation, she attempts to illustrate the complicated layers of a society untouched by the outside world.

Lenski explores southern character types similar to those found in the fiction of William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell, two prominent southern writers of adult fiction at the time of *Strawberry Girls* publication. The world that Lenski documents often features people made mean by hard times; fiercely proud and independent people; people embroiled in family feuds; and people dependent on farms that cannot support them. Lenski's strength as a writer is her ability to render a vivid portrait of the world in which her characters live; her weakness is her failure to fully develop her characters as distinct personalities.



## Themes and Characters

Birdie Boyer is ten years old and full of optimism and love of life. She and her parents, three brothers, and two sisters have just moved to the area from northern Florida when the story opens. She is excited to be in a new place and is hoping to make new friends. Initially she is disappointed when she meets her closest neighbors, the Slaters.

The Boyers are a hard-working family whose members love one another and try to be kind to others. The Slaters, on the other hand, are lazy, dirty, and unkempt. The father goes on drunken binges, and the older boys beat up the schoolteacher. Mrs. Slater does the best she can with a husband and sons she cannot control. Her twelve-year-old son, Shoestring, is at times vindictive but often seems regretful for the behavior of his family.

The feud that ensues between the two families—primarily between Mr. Boyer, a farmer who believes in fencing in land and Mr. Slater, a cattleman who believes in open range—pits good against evil. While the distinction between good and evil is clear in the conflict between the fathers, it is less clear in the relationship between Birdie and Shoestring. Birdie is definitely portrayed as the good character, but she occasionally feels hatred for the Slaters. On the other hand, Shoestring, the supposedly bad character, has moments when he feels remorseful and yearns to straighten out the feud between the families.

Lenski focuses on the poor working class in *Strawberry Girl*. The Boyers are not as impoverished as the Slaters, but they are poor and live on the same economic level as other members of the community. The Boyers' work ethic is important to the development of the theme, and hard work is identified with the good characters. Although the novel portrays very realistic problems and feelings, good does triumph over evil and all the problems are resolved neatly at the end.





## Topics for Discussion

1. Birdie's sense of responsibility is illustrated by her attitude toward her chores. Cite examples from the story that demonstrate her work ethic. What is Shoestring's attitude towards chores?

2. What is the significance of the title?

3. The question of fences or open range is uppermost in the minds of most of the characters in *Strawberry Girl*. Present both sides of the issue. With which side do you agree?

4. "Gettin' biggety" is mentioned time and again. What does it mean and who uses the expression?

5. Mrs. Slater holds a "chicken pilau."

What is it and why does she have it?

6. What types of food are staples in this novel? Do they differ from the types of food you eat?

7. What does Mrs. Boyer use in the strawberry field to scare off the Slaters?

Why does it work?

8. Reports and Papers 1. A great deal of time goes into the strawberry business. Report on the process, from planting to picking, as described in the novel and in other sources.

2. Lenski uses regional expressions and dialect in her book. Cite examples.

Does this help you to understand the characters? Why or why not?

3. The Boyers and Slaters have different ideas about the treatment of animals, from rabbits to dogs to cattle.

Why? Cite examples.

4. Realism was still an evolving concept in young adult literature when this book was written. Explain how realism is used in this book and give examples.

5. Which character did you like the most? Which did you like the least?

Why?

6. Do Lenski's illustrations capture the spirit of the story? Why or why not? Give examples.

## For Further Reference

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Martin's Press, 1983. Entry on Lenski states that her plots center on modest success stories.

Kunitz, Stanley J., and Howard Haycroft, eds. *Junior Book of Authors*.

New York: H. W. Wilson, 1951. Entry on Lenski is a short autobiographical sketch.

Lenski, Lois. *Journey into Childhood: The Autobiography of Lois Lenski*. New York: Lippincott, 1972. Lenski's life story makes interesting reading. She includes her reasons for writing regional novels.

Roginski, Jim, editor. *Newbery and Caldecott Medalists and Honor Book Winners: Bibliographies and Resource Material through 1977*. Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1982, pp. 169-173. This entry lists background reading for Lenski's works.

## Related Titles/Adaptations

Each of the seventeen regional books by Lenski focuses on a young person.

Lenski visited every region about which she planned to write, and patterned her characters and their actions after real life. Joanda Hutley of Cotton in *My Sack* and Felix of San Francisco Boy resemble Birdie Boyer in that they are particularly well-drawn, insightful characters.

*Strawberry Girl* was produced as a filmstrip with record by Miller-Brody Productions in 1973.



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