

**Mail-Order Kid:  
An Orphan Train Rider's Story**

**An Amazon and Kindle best seller**

“A classic.”

The massive orphan train exodus whisked three-year-old Teresa from the safety of her New York orphanage, where the worst thing the Foundling nuns did was wash her curly black hair, to a desolate house and cold-hearted “parents” in Kansas. There she entered a small and strange Volga German world whose inhabitants spoke a language she had never heard. In this odd world, she encountered whippings and sexual abuse.

Perhaps half a million children, like Teresa, were plucked from orphanages and shipped by rail (or “relocated”) to nearly every state in the Union from 1854 to 1929.

*Mail-Order Kid* looks at the orphan train movement through the eyes of one small child who yearns to know her “real” mother, survives a tortured childhood, and ultimately, as an adult, comes to terms with her past, her faith, and herself.

**Read an excerpt from the book:**

**Teacher's Pet**

In the fall of 1912, Teresa entered first grade. Hand in hand with Bappa, as she now called Mr. Bieker, she walked not to the schoolhouse but to Saint Anthony's.

The buzz of children's voices enveloped her as she entered the sanctuary. Down the aisle she and Bappa walked, row by row, past children in pews according to their ages. When they reached the front row, Bappa gave her to the nuns, owl nuns whose pleated white wimples circled their faces.

Too excited to remain still, Teresa discovered that nuns quieted children who whisper or squirm. After Father Wenzel's Mass, the Sisters escorted the children to Schoenchen's tiny schoolhouse adjacent to the church. Only nuns taught in this public school. There Teresa entered a classroom for first-, second-, and third- grade students. She was among the youngest and certainly the tiniest of those students.

School confused Teresa. She spoke three languages: elitist High German the Wenzels taught her, Volga German dialect with its smattering of Russian that the villagers spoke, and English she used personally.

At school, her teacher, Sister Gertrude, spoke only English or High German while the students spoke nothing but Volga German. Teresa was the only child in the first three grades who could speak three languages; it marked her as the teacher's pet. What should she do? Speak High German and English to impress the teacher? Or speak only Volga German and align herself with her classmates? Who would befriend her?

She soon found out, for the schoolchildren's taunts began immediately. Their words rang in her ears. At recess, children called her "*das verrucktee*" or "the crazy one." This brought her to tears. She knew she was different, tiny and dark-haired and excitable, not stocky and stolid like them, but that didn't make her crazy.

A few days later, children called Teresa "*ein yud*," meaning a Jew. Was she? The Biekers sometimes called her "*Jude*," which meant Jew in German, but Teresa thought they were guessing. What was a Jew anyway? Something bad? She tightened her stomach against them all.

But when children start to sing, "Nobody wants you! Your own mother didn't want you," Teresa's stomach twisted into a knot. *How dare they say such a thing!* She knew her mother wanted her. She knew it! Then she wondered, did her mother really want her? A warm flush of shame drenched her when she thought her mother might not.

One day some schoolchildren cried, "*Da komt ya das geschickte*" or "Here comes the sent-for one," as though she were a mail-order kid requested from a catalog. Teresa considered that. In a sense, the Biekers had sent for her. Still, the children's ridicule made her feel small, especially when one said: "You were shipped like a package of Arbuckle's coffee." Teresa knew Arbuckle's coffee. Grandma used it when she had no time to roast green coffee beans in the oven. Bappa didn't sell the popular coffee in his shop, because people could buy it only from a catalog, as Teresa's tormentors well knew.

Fortunately, Teresa found a champion in Sister Gertrude, her first-grade teacher. Like all the Saint Joseph teachers, Sister Gertrude wore black robes topped with a white yoke, a pleated white wimple encircling her face, and a white boxlike hat. When the nun heard the schoolchildren's taunts, she said, "Teresa, you stay in for recess today. I want to talk to you." The children cheered.

After they left, Sister Gertrude sat Teresa on her lap, "Don't let those dumb Roosians bother you."

The nun's words poured over Teresa like cool water on a hot day.

Sister Gertrude's words healed some of Teresa's anguish, but they also made her smug. When children called her names, Teresa called back, "I'm not dumb like you are." Her pride swelled. In class when a student stood to read and stumbled over words, Teresa, who could read so much better, plugged her ears.

None of this increased her popularity.

But Sister Gertrude ameliorated the stings. The nun often held the girl on her lap during recess or gave her a holy card featuring a picture of Mary, Christ, or the Sacred Heart. However, not even Sister Gertrude could keep the boys from throwing snowballs at her as she ran home from school that winter.

^^^

That fall Teresa expected school to begin with Mass as it had last year, but no. Students went directly to school. Nor was Sister Gertrude teaching first, second, and third graders, as she had last year. Instead, behind her desk stood Claud Urban, a trained secular school teacher who

replaced the sister when Kansas forbade Saint Joseph nuns to teach in Schoenchen's public school.

Mr. Urban seemed nice. Every day he sported a red necktie and smelled as fragrant as a flower. Still, Teresa felt queasy as she watched him rip students from their desks and beat them. Would he whip her? But why? She came on time to school with her lessons prepared and never made a fuss.

During one study period, her lessons already prepared, Teresa flipped page after page in her reader. Absorbed in the book's illustrations, she didn't notice Mr. Urban until he grabbed her and flung her across her desk. His wooden stick bit the backs of her thighs.

Teresa told no one. She knew the Biekers, like most adults, would side with Mr. Urban. After that, her chest tightened whenever Mr. Urban walked near her. *Is it my turn?* In self-defense, she studied her teacher's whippings. She expected him to whip most frequently students who ignored their lessons, but he didn't. In fact, he just nodded when some children said they couldn't finish Monday's assignment because of their parents' Sunday night beer party. He didn't even protest when mothers pulled their daughters from class to help with the washing. Maybe he knew, as Teresa did, that Volga Germans respected teachers but had scant use for education. Eventually she determined that while Mr. Urban whipped everyone, he whipped noisy students more often than quiet ones. *Look at that*, she told her mother. *He'd rather have students silent than learning.*

^^

Then Grandma's father, Johannes Werth, died.

When Teresa arrived at the wake, a lively affair that featured plenty of eating, beer drinking, and reciting the rosary, she intended to see what a dead person looked like.

"Bappa," she said, "lift me so I can see in the casket." He did.

There lay Grandfather Werth, suited out in his Sunday best, his eyes closed and his hands folded. Oddly, he wore a cloth tied around his head and under his chin.

"Why is he wearing that bandana?" Teresa asked.

"Keeps his jaw shut."

From this she learned that when you die, you can't keep your mouth closed, a curious fact.

Then amazingly, the next day she found herself a celebrity among her classmates for having dared to look at a corpse.

^^

On the day of Mrs. Spallen's spring visit, Teresa kept bouncing outdoors, hoping to spot the Foundling agent's hired buggy.

"Sit down," Bappa said. "The watched kettle never boils, you know."

But Teresa couldn't sit. As she waited outdoors, safe from Bappa, she practiced a little dance step she'd invented.

Finally Mrs. Spallen came, right on time. She greeted Teresa with a kiss that left a moist spot on her cheek. As the agent rustled into the house with her satchel, the Biekers' main room seemed warmer. Grandma poured Arbuckle's coffee for the grownups and put a glass of milk in front of Teresa.

"Well," Mrs. Spallen said, "how are you? How are things working out?"

She addressed Teresa, but Bappa answered, "I don't think we'll have to send her back to New York this year."

He laughed, but his joke chilled Teresa. For some time, whenever she became too energetic or lost her temper, Bappa threatened to send her to the Foundling, which he described as a reform school. Or Grandma mentioned Albert, alarming Teresa. Grandma knew Albert; she was a Werth before she married, and the Werths took Albert. He rode out on the same train as Teresa, but they soon sent him back.

"Albert looks just like you," Grandma would say. "He's your brother."

Teresa hated it when the Biekers compared her to Albert; how could she possibly be as horrible as he was. The Werths had sent him back. She knew Grandma meant she and Albert were related because they both were so contrary and high-spirited. The thought that Mrs. Spallen might take her, like the notorious Albert, back to New York made her shrink.

But Mrs. Spallen spoke again, asking routine questions: "Are you getting enough to eat? Does Mrs. Bieker make you new clothes? Are you happy here?"

Teresa answered affirmatively. What else could she do? Say that living with the Biekers left her feeling unwanted, a feeling that haunted her like a ghost. Mention the slaps and the whippings? The strange way Bappa touched her? But the Biekers sat right there listening!

Besides, if she said she was unhappy, what would Mrs. Spallen do? Take her to New York as she'd taken Albert? Would living in that reformatory be better than living in Schoenchen? So Teresa smiled, nodded, and tried not to choke on her milk.

^^

Bappa's drinking often resulted in his touching Teresa. Sometimes he looked at her and she saw desire flush his face. Since Bappa was the only father she knew, she supposed all fathers acted this way, even though Bappa warned her to tell no one about it. She never said anything. No! Oh, God!

Teresa feared Bappa's fondling, insistent even when she tried to wiggle off his lap, but her fear of Grandma weighed like a block of ice in her stomach. What if Grandma found out? Or even suspected?

One day, as he sometimes did, Bappa gave Teresa a penny after he finished. She laid the coin down in the kitchen, but later, when she returned to pick it up, it was gone. *It has to be here somewhere.* She searched and searched.

Then the door opened, and Teresa saw Grandma staring. "What are you looking for?"

"A penny."

"Where'd you get a penny?"

"Bappa gave it to me."

"What for?"

Teresa considered saying, "For running an errand." She often ran errands for Bappa, whose store doubled as a central office for the telephone company. His were the only phones in town except the priest's, but many villagers had telephones at their farms. Sometimes a farmer called Bappa to bring a person to the store phone, and Bappa often sent Teresa to fetch the person. Usually she received a nickel or a dime in return, sometimes only a penny.

When Teresa looked up, Grandma's eyes seemed to bore into her. The girl could almost hear her say, as she often did, "*Wer einmal luegt, dem glaubt man nicht, selbst wenn er auch die Wahrheit spricht*" or "He who tells one lie will not be believed even though he tells the truth." Teresa shivered. She dared not lie to Grandma, but she dare not break her promise to Bappa either. Whose anger should she risk? She chose a small lie to Grandma to avoid both Biekers' wrath.

"No reason."

## **Thieves, Rascals and Sore Losers: The Unsettling History of the Dirty Deals that Helped Settle Nebraska**

### **Amazon's Best History Book**

#### **Comments:**

Marilyn Coffey is a great writer. She tells it like it is -- the real stories, not the manufactured kind. Every so often I like to read history, to taste the real stuff. This book applies not just to Nebraska, but to the entire country -- how it was settled and (somewhat, at least) civilized. A fun, funny, sobering and enlightening book. —George Lauby, Editor, *The North Platte Bulletin*.

#### **Read More**

An impressively well researched, written, organized and presented regional history, *Thieves, Rascals & Sore Losers: The Unsettling History of the Dirty Deals that Helped Settle Nebraska* features a six-page Selected Bibliography and a nine page Index.

An extraordinary and consistently compelling read from beginning to end, *Thieves, Rascals & Sore Losers* is history as it is never taught in a classroom and a very highly recommended addition to community and academic library American History collections in general, and Nebraskan History supplemental studies lists in particular. For students and non-specialist general readers with an interest in the history of Nebraska, it should be noted that *Thieves, Rascals & Sore Losers* is also available in a Kindle edition (\$4.49). —Midwest Book Review

Entertaining, intriguing, and educational! Marilyn Coffey's exceptional clarity and sense of humor triumphs once again. —Carole Rosenthal, professor emeritus, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn

*Thieves, Rascals & Sore Losers* chronicles the unsettling history of the dirty deals that helped settle Nebraska in the late 1800s. Years of research went into this witty, detailed, and often gruesome account written by award-winning author Marilyn June Coffey. —Ellie Pelto, Reviewer

★★★★ Nebraska, the Cornhusker State, doesn't grace many pages in U.S. History textbooks, but not for a lack of trying. Though often overshadowed by the more flashy of the Union (California, New York, Texas, and Louisiana, to name a few) Nebraska has as deep and eccentric a history as the best of them, and Marilyn June Coffey does her state true justice in *Thieves, Rascals, and Sore Losers*. Written in an approachable and amusing manner, Coffey takes us on a journey to Harlan County, and the hijinks of territorial disputes, the Civil War, and stuffed ballot boxes that plagued her birthplace at its, well, birth. Surely a book all Americans should read, and anyone seeking a more diverse historical text than the run-of-the-mill wars & standard politics all too common with American textbooks.—Alex Hurst, NetGalley Reviewer on Goodreads  
[https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1699538867?book\\_show\\_action=false](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1699538867?book_show_action=false)

★★★★ I am not from Nebraska. I have never been to Nebraska. I've never been particularly interested in Nebraska, especially the particular counties of the state. So you might wonder why I requested Marilyn Coffey's *Thieves, Rascals & Sore Losers* and read it. It's because I'm a history nerd.

And, as Coffey's detailed history of Harlan County, Nebraska made clear to me, I knew a lot more about the state than I thought I did. This is, no doubt, thanks to a fascination with the Old West. Reading this book made me think of Laura Ingalls Wilder, of Willa Cather, of the novelization I've read of Tiana Rogers, of documentaries about the Wild West and the colorful figures then and there, and even of the Dog Soldiers and Cheyenne on the television show "Longmire." Coffey proves, with amazing success, that even the most minute details of history can be related to the larger picture that everyone knows just from... existing.

One of the best things about Coffey's book, though, is the conversational nature of it. There are facts and figures, dates and details, minutiae and momentous occasions - all as any history book has - but Coffey tells the story of Harlan County, of her county, in a voice that is relatable to laymen and, rare for books like this, highly entertaining. Imagined conversations between the colorful figures in the county, who might seem

dour and dusty in an ordinary book, bring to life a time and a place that must have been daunting and frightening and still a hopeful place to begin life. I kind of want to let Coffey tell me her interpretation of all my history now.

The only drawback is the last bit of the book, where Harlan County chooses its name, its county seat, and generally joins the "modern" world. So many vote counts and dates and judges' rulings bring the dusty and dour history back. But, then again, I like history so the "modern" parts are bound to lose me! —Nicole Overmoyer, a NetGalley Reviewer

★★★ *Thieves, Rascals, and Sore Losers* by Marilyn Coffey is an eBook that I read in late June. While not necessarily taking on a "gosh darn varmit" tone, its story-length chapters feel almost like they're verbally transcribed. —Kristine Fisher, NetGalley Reviewer

A couple weeks ago, someone was posting on Twitter about how boring a complete nothing Nebraska was. At that time, I'd just begun this book, and my thought was, that flat land and those no-nonsense tornado-withstanding buildings hide a past a whole lot wilder than you think!

The focus of this highly colorful, tall-tale feeling nonfiction work is the story of the long-standing feud between two Nebraskan cities in Harlan County, over which would get the county seat. The actual struggle took place 1871-1884, but the feud has come down a century and more since.

The author claims to have read uncounted ("innumerable") legal documents, court proceedings, records by historians, letters, and ancient newspaper clippings. There are no footnotes and there is only a partial bibliography, so the reader has to take it for granted that the conversations, and inner thoughts, as well as the physical descriptions, motivations, and goals of the colorful figures depicted here originate in some record or other.

The result is a highly readable, often funny, sometimes darkly humorous and deadily satiric story of the Nebraska plains from the time they belonged to the vast population of buffalo and the Native Americans who chased them, up to the pompous, brass-band eighteen-eighties.

Many of the pioneers who first entered that land had greed as motivation, and their strategies and tactics proved it out. Others had visions of a new land, great opportunities after the wars and famines of other nations drove them to set forth across the ocean in order to start over. (Assuming they weren't forced over, as in the case of the relatively small number of slaves brought in by settlers; one of the most satisfying small stories is of a man who brought along his six slaves, all of whom promptly took off, the two women first. And they successfully escaped him, in spite of thousand-dollar bounties on their heads. One can only imagine what their lives were like with this guy.)

The grimmest reading is reserved for the wars against the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Sioux, and Pawnee, who were cheated and then massacred—and who often fought back just as viciously, both sides taking it out on the non-combatants, such as the thoroughly evil Sand Creek Massacre.

Rascals and sore losers abound as soon as there were enough people to try starting legislatures. Part of that colorful history are the early legislators who got themselves

voted in via crooked elections and proceeded to argue over whether or not one could drink out of a whiskey bottle while legislating. One of the few accomplishments of this bunch of rowdies (who had knock-down drag-outs over who got to hold the gavel) was to inadvertently repeal all laws, restoring Nebraska to colonial status. Too bad the British seemed unaware of their opportunity to come in and restore things to pre-1776 status. Or maybe they did know, and wisely decided it was too much trouble.

All-in-all it's a fun read, and if those conversations and inner thoughts are more fiction than non, well, who is to say for certain?—Sherwood Smith NetGalley Reviewer

Link: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1743728810>

★★Being from Kansas, I have rather strong feelings about my neighboring state to the north. However, I was able to set those aside and for the most part I enjoyed this look at the early days of settling Nebraska. I would have liked to see more about the interactions between the settlers and the Native Americans and a little less about the voter fraud in the various elections, but I guess since one of those is still an issue in today's society, I guess I understand the focus.

—Jacinta M Carter, NetGalley Reviewer

Impressed with the amount of research that had to have gone into this and that Ms. Coffey has so skillfully distilled into clear, well-written stories that bring to life the frontier life in Nebraska, the personal and political struggles for land and power. Really liked it.

—Deirdre L. Evans

I really enjoyed the story of chicanery and trickery that surrounded the founding of Harlan County, Nebraska. The problem with regional history is that it can become boring very quickly to those outside the region. Coffey avoids this pitfall by focusing on the people and their antics. Her informal tone and wealth of resources makes this a great tale. The only challenge in the eBook format is that you can't flip to a map or list of residents as quickly as you would in a book. Such reference materials go a long way in helping to keep all the details straight. That aside, this was a pretty good book.

—Dave Milbrandt, NetGalley Reviewer

Another well-written and informative book from this gifted writer! Marilyn Coffey will entertain you from the first page until the end! —Avid Romantix

This is an honest, intimate, enlightening review of the folks who settled and populated that part of the Louisiana Purchase that became the great state of Nebraska. I laughed till I cried, it is in places that funny. And, truthfully, it is joyous to read of an American state population who can top New Mexico in the fiercely independent populous and dirty tricks government men. I now feel a kinship with the cornhusker state.

—Bonnye Reed Fry, NetGalley Reviewer

Stunning writing, a page turner as per usual for Marilyn's work! This one has got it all.

—John Williamson