

Marilyn June Coffey, Great Plains Writer

Marilyn June Coffey is a Nebraska-based writer covering Great Plains history, memoir and poetry. Her wry poem won a national Pushcart Prize, her history books twice merited Amazon recognition, and her internationally published novel set a world record for its frankness.

In 1958, Coffey watched her father, Tom Coffey, testify against Jimmy Hoffa in Washington D.C. before the Senate Rackets Committee, including Robert and then-Senator John Kennedy. That experience would blossom into *That Punk Jimmy Hoffa!*, Coffey's latest book, which describes the 10-year conflict between Hoffa, his Teamsters, and her dad.

A vicious, illegal Teamsters strike drove Coffey's Transfer out of business, but her dad didn't stop there. He swore he'd get back at "that punk Jimmy Hoffa," and he did, in Washington DC and elsewhere. [LINK](#)

Jack Kerouac

Coffey lived in Nebraska until she read Jack Kerouac's historic *On the Road*, that vision of travel, freedom and hope. Soon she followed Kerouac's track, to Denver, New Orleans, San Francisco, San Diego, Portland, and then New York City, where she lived for 30 years.

While there she helped the Associated Press put out *The Torch Is Passed*, the first book to hit the stands after John F. Kennedy's assassination. She became an active feminist, one of five who birthed the popular Woman's Salon, a forum for feminist writers. And she began teaching part-time.

Now retired, Coffey taught writing for thirty-four years at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, Boston University, and Fort Hays State University in Kansas. She twice earned tenure, having earned her M.F.A. at Brooklyn College in 1981.

Mail-Order Kid

Coffey's most popular history book is *Mail-Order Kid: An Orphan Train Rider's Story*, a biography of Teresa Martin. She rode the orphan train from New York to Hays, Kansas when she was three. Teresa was part of a 1854-1929 movement that relocated up to 400,000 children from East Coast cities to farm families over most of the United States.

Given to a dysfunctional family, Teresa struggled all her life to better herself: marriages, two daughters, graduations, work as a librarian, first in Hays, then in Denver to become a medical librarian at hospitals there. Near the end of her life, she found her relatives. They were Jewish, but Teresa had been baptized and raised a Catholic. She resolved that dilemma by wearing both a Star of David and a Crucifix on her necklace.

That necklace can be seen at the Frank Carlson Library, Concord KS, near a statue of Teresa doing what she loved to do most: reading a book.

Photo by Theresa Rosell Mason



Mail-Order Kid became an Amazon and Kindle best seller, a finalist in Eric Hoffer's national book award, and winner of National Orphan Train Complex's Special President's Award. [LINK](#)

Thieves, Rascals & Sore Losers

In southern Nebraska, the tiny town of Orleans has hated Coffey's home town Alma as long as she could remember. Something infuriated Orleans in 1884 when Alma won the Harlan County seat. To find out what that was, Coffey probed hundreds of pages of Harlan County hand-written commissioner's journals and innumerable court proceedings.

Neither town was innocent. Harlan County settlers tossed out ballots, cast illegal votes, tore down posted notices, hid election tallies, stole county records. To find out if this behavior were typical, she explored political life in early Nebraska. Unscrupulous characters were rampant, from presidents to homesteaders.

Coffey wrote these stories in her *Thieves, Rascals & Sore Losers: An Unsettling History of Settlers in South Central Nebraska*. Her tongue-in-cheek history focuses on the oodles of dirty deals rampant from 1853 to 1884 as Nebraska was settled.

Thieves, Rascals & Sore Losers is an Amazon Best History Book and an Amazon best seller in two categories.

Archives

Coffey now lives in Omaha with a feisty orange cat and an undisciplined garden. She continues to write her blog, an intermittent newsletter called *a JoLt of CoFFeY*. [LINK](#)

An hour away in Lincoln is the Marilyn Coffey Collection, housed in the Archives and Special Collections of Love Library, University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The collection— about 50 boxes of manuscripts and other papers—contains much of Coffey's writing, from 1948 to date.

Her collection is in good company, residing next door to the largest collection of Willa Cather related material in the world. And next to other collected writers like Mari Sandoz, Loren C. Eiseley, Roscoe Pound, John G. Neihardt, Ted Kooser and Wright Morris.