



The Mercy Seat

Rilla Askew

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Few first novels garner the kind of powerful praise awarded this epic story that takes place on the dusty, remorseless Oklahoma frontier, where two brothers are deadlocked in a furious rivalry. Fayette is an enterprising schemer hoping to cash in on his brother's talents as a gunsmith. John, determined not to repeat the crime that forced both families to flee their Kentucky homes, doggedly follows his tenacious brother west, while he watches his own family disintegrate. Wondrously told through the wary eyes of John's ten-year-old daughter, Mattie, whose gift of premonition proves to be both a blessing and a curse, **The Mercy Seat** resounds with the rhythms of the Old Testament even as it explores the mysteries of the Native American spirit world. Sharing Faulkner's understanding of the inescapable pull of family and history, and Cormac McCarthy's appreciation of the stark beauty of the American wilderness, Rilla Askew imbues this momentous work with her tremendous energy and emotional range. It is an extraordinary novel from a prodigious new talent.

Strange Business, a collection of linked stories that won the 1993 Oklahoma Book Award, is available from Penguin.

The Mercy Seat Details

Date : Published May 1st 1998 by Penguin Books (first published August 1st 1997)

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Author : Rilla Askew

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Cheri McLelland says

It was ok up until the middle of the story. Then it just all kinda fell apart for me. It described the comings and goings of the characters but with no rhyme or reason. The second half of the book was just kinda pointless to me. I had to force my self to finish it.

Meg says

A bit too long-winded for me.

Pat says

Brilliant, brutal, beautiful novel of the journey west, in the 1880s, of a desperate, haunted family from Kentucky, told largely thru the eyes of Mattie, a ten year old girl when the novel starts, and a powerful, embittered, prematurely aged Soul by journey's end, although this journey West doesn't cease with arrival. Her family, fractured by sickness and death, must continually adjust to the natural hardships of moving into a wild and unforgiving landscape. Askew's writing is achingly, sumptuously vivid, dragging the reader viscerally into the sights, smells, sounds, sensations of this stark world so that one inhabits the moments, along with the characters, with no distance between their lives and ours. This, one says to oneself, this is how it must have been, this beautiful, this cruel, this alive, to exist on the frontier. This journey is also the profoundly sorrowful saga of two brothers, locked in bondage to each other thru blood-love and rivalry, unable to walk away from the other, drawn in complicated orbit around each another by one's foolish pride and bad judgment and the other's loyalty; each is destined to be the undoing of the other and by the examples they set, to drag all their kin and community along with them. Intertwined with the Biblical Cain and Abel motif, is the story of the the Western land (Oklahoma, Indian Territory) itself and the root legends and beliefs of its Indian peoples, as well as the legacy of slavery and the unfinished pain of the Civil War. The characters are interconnected by Fate and choice; the author's philosophical and spiritual agenda is to make us think hard about what is God's will, the line between revenge and forgiveness, and how one's soul is saved or lost. There is a crackling good story in these pages and characters fully formed, authentic western voices, who will make you re-read and ponder their actions. This is a dense book, a deep book, multi-layered and at times elusive, and thus not for every taste. It reminds me of Faulkner or Thomas Wolfe, and if you see it through, it will not disappoint.

Sari Lynn says

At times brilliant and engaging, at other times dull and plodding. It had a somewhat spiritual undercurrent that didn't work for me, but may resonate with other readers who have similar leanings.

Michelle Cox says

Weird. The story goes around in circles. Plot points that drag on as important leave you disappointed. Voice changes and point of view are random and not smoothly used. I finished it, but not at all satisfying.

Laura says

I hated this book. I never want to give up once I pick something up to read... but I really had to battle my way through this. Even though the writing was skilled and the language tempting, the subject matter, the characters and the lack of a plot or any point to all the sadness just seemed not worth all the trouble.

Elissa Lawrence says

What starts off as an eye-opening and descriptive portrayal of two families' traveling westward to flee consequences of choices made in their native land quickly becomes tedious and confusing. Paragraph-long sentences riddled with secondary and tertiary descriptions bog down the flow of the story, requiring the reader to have to reread a number of passages to full understand what had been conveyed. The narrative changes voices intermittently and quickly shuts out the inner dialogue of Mattie, the main character, who had offered the most interesting insights. While the climax and resolution of the plot will make you gasp, the events leading up to it may turn you away before you get there.

Katie says

I feel disingenuous clicking the little button next to "read," because I didn't even finish this. It was too easy to walk away from these unlikeable characters. I don't even wonder what happened to them.

Steve Whitworth says

I have read other Rilla Askew books - Beulah Land being among the best books I've ever read. Her being an Oklahoma author and the settings being in Oklahoma are of interest to me as a native Oklahoman.

However, The Mercy Seat was sort of a dichotomy for me. The words were beautifully constructed and the book was presented in exquisite detail. Therein lied part of the problem for me.

The story line was about two brothers and their families in the late 1800s who had to leave Kentucky under suspicious circumstances and headed to what was then Indian Territory (later to become Oklahoma), and all that happened along the way and after resettling in southeastern Indian Territory. Interesting story line with lots of potential.

But, the characters were eccentric to a fault, each in different ways, and to me, none of them had any redeeming qualities to make the reader all that interested. They were just all weird individually, and in their

interactions with one another - especially within their own families.

There was so much detail written that it detracted from the actual story. Eventually toward the end of the book, I was so ready to finish it that once the author started with the detail (which added little to the story) which I had learned by this point would last quite a number of pages, I just began skipping pages until the story picked up again. It sort of felt like the book that would never end.

I guess the most telling factor is that even though I wanted to get to the end to see what eventually happened, I was really glad when I finally reached the end!

Karen says

Rilla Askew's *Mercy Seat* is in the top five of my most favorite books. It's rich language just pulls you in and wraps around you like a warm, comforting blanket. If you like history, especially the West, you will enjoy the book as it chronicles the story of a family moving west from Arkansas to Oklahoma and what happens when they arrive. Even if you don't like history you will still enjoy the book because the characters are central to the story. I watched Ms. Askew do a book talk about this book at the University of Oklahoma many years ago and truly enjoyed listening to her discuss the book and her background. It's one of only a few books that I would actually read again.

Debbie says

This is one of the most depressing books I have ever read.

Angela says

An interesting book but very very bleak.

Mintzis says

The novel strains too hard to turn purple prose into poetry. At times it makes it. The main characters have the same problem, seeming two dimensional mist of the time and fully realized in rare glimpses. The 3 is for effort.

Kkraemer says

By reading this book, I have an entirely new view of the prairie and of its people.

The Lodi family moves to Oklahoma from Kentucky. They leave at a bad time -- weather is cold enough to freeze the chickens in their temporary coop, and the calf dies -- and they really have no ideas where they are going. There are 2 parents and 5 children, 1 an infant. In a very short amount of time, there is 1 parent and 4 children. From that point, the challenges continue: sickness, ignorance, grinding poverty, starvation, depression, history, outlaws...all are part of the life of the Lodi family.

This book is written in spirals. The plot is a spiral, where early incidents continue to define what happens later. Thoughts spiral and affect reality. Things spiral out of control, and they also spiral in predictable ways. Even Askew's scenes, characters, and sentences spiral: everything is met again and again, each time slightly differently, but each time in a new and surprising as way.

Like that last sentence.

In this family's life, the spiritual, geographical, social, and familial intermingle and echo one another. By the end, I understand how difficult my own forebears' lives must have been. I also celebrate the fact that my own family were prairie people 2, 3, and 4 generations ago. I suspect it made me strong, but I'm not sure that I have what it would take to survive.

Emily says

If Faulkner were a woman.
