

Half Broke Horses—A Review

Thomas Schneider

December 24, 2014

Half Broke Horses is a “True Life Novel”, written by Jeannette Walls and published 2013 by Schöningh Verlag, Paderborn. As it describes the life of Lily Casey Smith, it is set in the first half of the twentieth century. The novel begins with her saving herself and her siblings from a flashflood when she is only a few years old, and ends shortly after the birth of her granddaughter Jeannette. In that time, she grows up, is sent to and taken from a catholic school, becomes a teacher herself, marries, gets divorced due to her husband being a polygamist, marries again and gives birth to two children. She moves house about a hundred times and has even more different jobs—she also does not hesitate to sell booze during the Prohibition and do other questionable jobs.

Lily is born in 1901 in a dugout in Salt Draw, Texas. She is daughter to Robert Adam Casey and Daisy Mae Peacock and has two siblings, her brother Buster and her sister Helen. She gets married to Ted Conover in 1921, but upon discovering that he is already married to another woman, she has the marriage annulled in 1928. Lily then gets to know Jim Smith and marries him in 1931. Her daughter, Rosemary, is born in the same year, and in 1934, her son Little Jim is born. Together, they manage a large ranch in Arizona, owned by Britons, but eventually it is sold to someone else and they have to leave. She later becomes precinct captain for the Democratic Party.

Jim Smith, Lily’s husband runs a car repair shop and gas station before he moves to the ranch with Lily. He usually ends up being very respected in whatever neighborhood he comes to, as he is very helpful and kind.

Buster is Lily’s brother. He is a bit simple-minded sometimes, but he successfully runs KC Ranch with his wife, Diane.

Helen is Lily’s sister. She is a bit of a floozy when she has moved to Hollywood, and indeed she gets pregnant from a sleazy yet-to-be Hollywood star manager. She cannot bear with it, and so she eventually hangs herself.

Her mother, Daisy, is called a “Lady”, i. e. she does not do any work, is very faithful in God (during catastrophes, she rather prays instead of helping), yet Lily gets along with her quite good.

Her father, in contrast, is a bit disabled because of being kicked in the head by a horse long time ago, yet he does what he can. He cannot do every job, so Lily often helps him, but what he does is done right.

Lily's children, Rosemary and Little Jim, are raised on the Arizona ranch, thus they do not really get to know any other kids in their childhood. They are later sent to various schools, but they do not behave well, get bad grades and generally miss the ranch and the life there. Although Lily is not satisfied with Rosemary's husband, she accepts him and they do come to a wonderful life.

The motif of the American Dream is visible throughout the book: Lily does not have much, yet she manages to be successful. She does not exactly become a millionaire, but in the end, she is satisfied with what she has achieved. The phrase "When God closes a window, He opens a door, but it is up to you to find it" is mentioned several times throughout the book, and Lily finds many doors in her life.

Jeannette Wall's novel is written in the perspective of Lily herself. She often uses colloquial and also strong language, which contributes to the easy-to-read style. The Schöningh Verlag edition has many remarks and an appendix with further explanations, thus it is readable for an intermediate pupil without much effort.

"Half Broke Horses" proved to be way better than I expected—not because it was so good, but because my expectations on a book read in school are set very low. I would probably not read it deliberately, and if was given the book as a present, it would most likely end up in the bookshelf without ever being read, but given the circumstances, it is "okay".