

The Heart of the *Knock-Kneed Cowboy* Book

The story that follows grew from a tale I made up for my two sons as we traveled long distances by car to visit their grandparents. When “Are we there yet?” grew old, I knew it was time to break into another form of diversion. Thus, “Casey, the Knock-Kneed Cowboy” was born in a simpler form than you see here.

Now, decades later, encouraged by friends who have been entertained (or are kind/ dishonest enough to say they have been) by my travel reports, I present “Casey...” to you in a form that aspires to achieve several objectives:

- **Endear** cowboy ways to the reader/ listener: A cowboy is noted for his simple desires and routines, his “common sense” approach to challenges, and for his self-contained way of relating to others. He’s often a private guy who doesn’t say much, who thinks and feels much more deeply than he lets anyone else know.

For more details about cowboys and their lives, a few songs come to mind:

- Willie Nelson’s “Mama, Don’t Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys” and “My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys”
- A host of cowboy (especially rodeo cowboys) songs by the late Chris LeDoux
- By Trent Willmon:
 - “How a Cowboy Lives from *Broken In*
 - “The Ropin’ Pen” and “Good Horses to Ride” from *A Little More Livin’*
 - “Population 81” and “The Good Life” by Trent Willmon on his eponymous CD, *Trent Willmon*

If you absolutely must make a choice among songs or albums, be sure to select Trent’s. He not only suffered through “Casey...” and my other primitive “Are-we-there-yet?” tales, but also proofread this tale for wrangler accuracy.

In addition, he and his brother Rusty will select my old folks’ home. It is in my best interest to be nice to them and to do all I can to assure that they don’t go to the “poor house” before my departure. Buy Trent’s stuff. Okay?

- **Engage, enthrall, and entertain** “kids” of all ages. That “We don’t stop laughing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop laughing” is a warning we can all heed before it’s too

late. This story – which tells itself, with only a bit of “fine-tuning” from “yores truly” – is a reminder not to take our lives so seriously, but occasionally to take a step back and listen to another’s tale of woes and worries. Perhaps then we can see ourselves and our temporary worries as being less important than before.

Furthermore, along these lines, while this story is fictional, it’s about people who talk like *real* people... well, like real *cowboy people*, that is. So, if you don’t like present participles to miss their g’s, just write them in, wudja? I’m *thinkin’* that you *jest dunno* how folks talk in the “wild Wild West.” And if you *lernt yer spellin’* east of the Pond and can’t stand my “neighbor,” simply mentally scribble in a *u* and be happy with your “neighbour.” I spent too many years as an English teacher countin’ off points for bad spellin’ to stay hung-up over *sech* trivialities any longer. Life is about loosening up, having fun, relaxing about things that don’t really matter anyway, and – by *golly*- about *LIVIN’!*

- ***Engender inter-generational and -species reading.*** In case you need remindin’, here it is: Have fun! Read to your child, your parent, your grandparent, your dog. If you can’t stand my writin’, then find someone whose writing you can stand, and READ.

Why read with someone? In my memory lives a vivid picture of myself sitting on “Pa’s” lap as he read nursery rhymes and fairy tales from my favorite book (a big, faded, dog-eared edition with few illustrations). There, enjoying the aroma of the Prince Albert tobacco in his unlit pipe, I created mental pictures from the words he read and experienced the growth of love not only for my doting grandfather, but also for reading, for playing with words, and for “traveling” to times and places other than my own. Those loves continue to enrich my life and the lives of those who tolerate my word play today.

With repetition, those favorite tales imprinted themselves on my mind. When Pa attempted changing the wording (whether through a desire to end our session to enjoy his pipe or perhaps to test my attention), I’d take his freshly shaven (and frequently nicked) face in my little hands, turn it towards mine, and correct him: “No, Pa, it ‘posed to say...,” and proceed to supply the original wording, embellishing the words with all the emotions a toddler knows.

I hope that you, too – regardless of your age or species – will read your own feelings into the words on the *Knock-Kneed Cowboy* pages and will treat your mind to the joy of creating its own images from the words in print.

- ***Encourage a love of learning and imagination.*** Ever notice how so many kindergarten teachers address their students in a sing-song voice, “Now, boys and girls...,” as if the little hooligans were too stupid to understand multiple syllables? Or, listen to first-time grandparents cooing, “Does teeny-tiny Georgie-worgie want his itsy-bitsy bottle-wottle?” Hmmm, maybe they think that the genes inherited from the other side of the family were as lacking as the ones derived from themselves?

A quarter-century of teaching proved to me that even the youngest children will select the box

containing 64 different crayons over the one containing only eight colors. Maybe they can't hold the skinny crayons very well, and perhaps they're not ready to *request* "fuchsia" or "mauve," but their eyes can distinguish those colors from the crayon marked *R-E-D*. Similarly, adults who limit their vocabulary to the "basic 8" (i.e., monosyllabic descriptions), cheat youngsters from the subtleties of thought and model "monochrome" thinking. Sure, "horsey" is fine if one doesn't care if the kid is as dumb as the in-laws, but how much better if Junior or Missy hears *mare, filly, colt, steed, cayuse, foal, bronco, mustang, gelding, stallion* and... Need I continue?

Such words used in context can help young thinkers (whether or not they are reading the words for themselves) figure out meanings, thus wrinkling the gray matter a bit. If context clues are not sufficient for deriving meaning, even in the twenty-first century, the astute have been known to dust off the old *Webster's* (or *Oxford's* if you're east of the Pond). The digitally adept may prefer to type in "dictionary" on their favorite search engine, and find the digital lexicon of choice.

Exposure to rich, colorful words at an early age empowers the minds to develop the skills to create the precise, detailed pictures. Certainly HDTV creates beautiful pictures, but the viewer's "gray matter" remains as smooth as his bottom end on the day of birth!

- ***Engrave a value on the reader/ listener's heart.*** While many of us have perfected selfishness in our lives, few of us have mastered self-love or self-acceptance. Our "inner critic" berates us "24/7" ("You woulda, coulda, shoulda" "Your left ear is too high." "You talk too loud." "You're too fat/ skinny/ pale/ dark/ stupid, etc"... on and on and on, day in, day out, year after year after year.

Instead of loving and accepting ourselves, we try to play "Mr. Potato Head" with ourselves, wishing or attempting to make our left side a mirror image of our right side or – perhaps worse still – our faces, bodies and spirits mirror images of the "beautiful people" around us. My desire is that we each find and treasure our individuality. It is the exact combination of one's "differentness" that makes us ALL the beautiful creatures we are. In striving to become someone we were never "cut out" to be, we often bring great pain to ourselves, camouflaging the true beauty of our uniqueness.

Above all, my wish is that each person touched by this writing (young or old, dark- or light-skinned, with a face that might "stop a clock" or would "make time stand still," with I.Q.'s of an Einstein or of a Celsius thermometer reading in winter) love and appreciate the unique combination of characteristics that make them the precious, perfect expression of the unique person they are: warts, wrinkles and all.

Uniquely yours,

Billie Willmon Jenkin