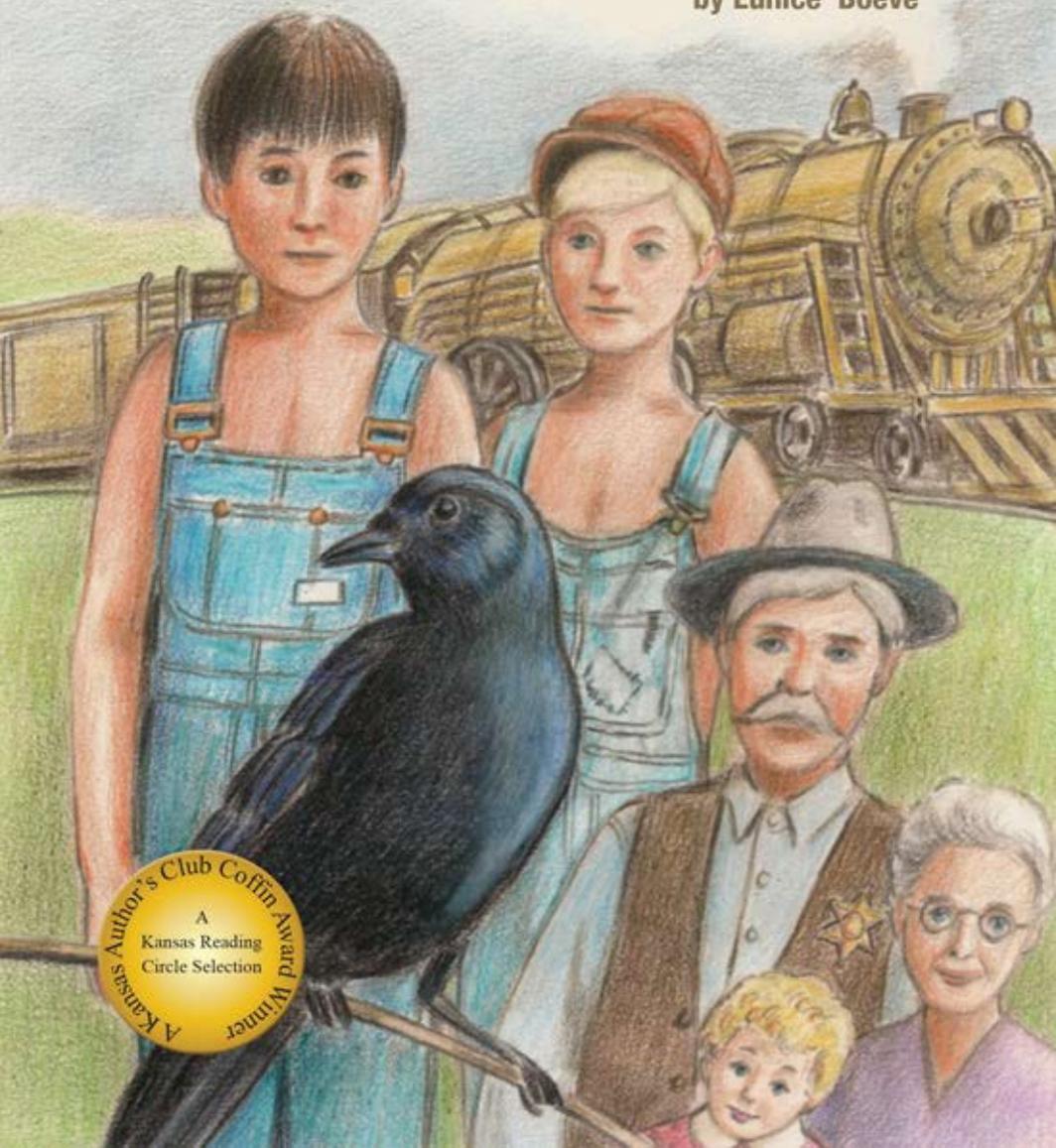


THE Summer OF THE Crow

by Eunice Boeve



A Kansas Author's Club Coffin Award Winner
A Kansas Reading Circle Selection

THE **Summer**
OF THE **Crow**

Written by
Eunice Boeve



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Dedication

*To my husband, Ron,
and granddaughter, Emily.*

&

*In memory of Louis Boeve,
the sheriff of Phillips County,
Kansas from 1962–1972.*

Chapter 1

Brady tossed aside the old broken wooden stake and inserted a new one into the round ring at the end of the trap's chain. Pounding it into the ground just enough to hold the trap and keep the prairie dog from pulling it down into its burrow, he hung the hammer back in the loop on his overalls and set the trap. After easing it carefully down into the entrance of the burrow, he stood up and called for his dog.

Brady had started trapping the small brown rodents when the county began paying two cents for each tail. With the drought turning their land to dust, they couldn't afford to have a worthless animal digging holes in their fields and eating what little did manage to grow. Besides he liked having a few coins to jingle in his pocket and spend on root beer floats when he got to town, and his dog sure enjoyed their twice-daily rounds of his trap-line.

Now picking up the old broken stake, Brady called to his dog. "Hey Taggart! Catch!"

The black dog, so big, his dad once said, it was like having a yearling calf in the house, jerked his nose up out of a straggle of weeds where he had been investigating a scent, started toward him, and then stopped to sniff the prairie dog carcass Brady had

tossed aside after cutting off the tail with his pocket knife.

“Come on, boy.” Brady held up the stake and pretended to give it a toss. “Leave it for the coyotes and the crows.”

The dog bounded toward him, his dark eyes fastened with eager anticipation on the stake. Brady grinned and threw it high in the air. Taggart charged forward, leaped up and caught it, raising small puffs of dust as his paws hit the ground.

“Great catch!” Brady called. Taggart trotted back to him, the stake clamped in his jaws. Brady thought he looked as pleased as a big league baseball player who had just made the winning catch in the World Series.

Brady loved baseball. Last fall when Mrs. Guilder brought her radio to school so they could listen to the Series, Brady had imagined himself a part of the roaring, cheering, heckling crowd. He could almost see Dizzy Dean pitch that final fireball to strike out Detroit’s Hank Greenberg and win the 1934 World Series for the St. Louis Cardinals.

He thought Mrs. Guilder acted like she was right there in the stands too, the way she jumped around and hollered. She was kind of old and a little bit fat. Lumpy was how Brady thought of her, but she sure loved baseball. She had sided with the Detroit Tigers because Eldon Auker played for them and he was from her old hometown in north central Kansas. She thought they all ought to be for Detroit since they were Kansans too. He’d told her his Grandpa Bud was the sheriff at Sentinel and she said it wasn’t

more than a hundred miles from Norcatur where she and Eldon Auker had once lived.

She even got Jim Conners, his best friend, to side with her. In fact all five of the boys, including Jim, had rooted for the Tigers along with Mrs. Guilder. He'd been the only one for St. Louis. The girls, all but seven-year-old Molly Bane, didn't care who won. Molly, though, had cheered right along with him, and the boys had teased him about siding with a little girl.

Mrs. Guilder said the students in town had a radio in the auditorium for the kids to listen to when they had free time. Brady thought there were probably a lot of boys there who'd cheered for the Cardinals.

This spring, graduation would end his eight years at their little country school. In the fall, he'd start high school in town. He hoped his dad would get him a car to drive back and forth. Otherwise, he'd have to board in town through the week and get home only on weekends. He hoped, if he got a car that Jim would change his mind about not going on to high school and would ride with him.

As he threw the stake one more time, Brady glanced up at the morning sun. "I've got to go Taggart," he called. "If I'm late, Mrs. Guilder will give me an extra assignment."

He started off across the barren fields in an easy run, his footfalls kicking up dust, Taggart trotting beside him. In his head, Brady could see how these fields had once looked before the drought and the dust storms. By now a lush carpet of green should have sprouted from the seed they'd sown last fall and by late June or early July be a golden sea of wheat

stretching as far as the eye could see. But the once fertile soil was gone. Dried out under the relentless sun, the rich topsoil had blown away in the wind. This spring, instead of a carpet of green, the little wheat that had survived was a pale, sickly color. Only the dusty weeds were undaunted by the lack of moisture and the suffocating dirt storms. This summer there would be little or no wheat to harvest and the knowledge sickened him with worry.

He had hoped one day to farm this land his great grandfather had homesteaded. His plans had always been to follow in his dad's footsteps with a degree in agriculture from Kansas State.

"Maybe you'll even find a wife there, like I did," his dad once said, teasing him and making his mom smile.

His parents had met at college when his dad was a senior and his mother a freshman. After his dad's graduation, they had married and come back to the farm where his mother had shared the household work with Grandma Foster and his father had farmed with Grandpa. Brady wished he could have known his dad's parents, but they had both died the year before he was born.

Brady's grandfather and his father had added more land to the original homestead. His dad had been so proud of his acres and acres of land, and "pleased," he said, that Brady wanted to farm them too. But now their fields were as barren as a desert and he was beginning to doubt that even if the rains came, the land could survive and be saved to pass on to him.

A sudden gust of wind whipped around him and he raised his eyes to scan the horizon, hopeful for signs of rain. But the pink-hued morning sky held only wispy drifts of clouds. He quickened his footsteps. It was getting late and he still had to get his lunch pail and run upstairs and empty his pockets of the five prairie dog tails he'd taken this morning.

He grinned to himself at the memory of the time he'd forgotten to empty his pockets and had dropped his overalls in the basket to be washed. His mother always checked his pockets for his knife or any spare change before throwing his overalls into the washing machine. That morning she had stuck her hand right into the mass of hairy tails.

"Brady Lee Foster!" she'd yelled. "If I ever find another mess like that in your pockets, you're washing your own overalls!"

He hadn't left any more tails, but he and his dad were doing the washing anyway and most of the rest of the housework. His mother coughed nearly all the time now and seemed to grow weaker by the day. About all she could manage were sitting down jobs like mending. But sometimes, if it was a clear day, she could cook an easy meal. Everything else soon had her coughing and gasping for breath.

Brady kept his own room now, and to help keep out some of the dirt and grit when a dust storm blew up, he'd been hanging a blanket at his window. Either he or his dad tried to stay close enough to the house so if a dust storm came up, they'd have time to run in and grab up some sheets and blankets, douse them in a tub of water and hang them, heavy and dripping, at

the windows downstairs. It was impossible now for his mother to lift the water-soaked blankets, let alone hang them up on the big nails they'd driven into the window frames.

"Mom," he called now as he stepped through the back door and into the house.

"I'm here." His mother's faint reply came from his parent's bedroom. He knocked and opened the door.

She was lying on the bed, propped up on a couple of pillows, her dark hair about her shoulders, a crochet hook and some blue yarn in her hands. In a corner of the room, his little sister sat cross-legged on the floor. Her blond head, capped in curls, was cocked to one side and tilted upward, her eyes fixed on a corner of the room near the ceiling. She was humming a faint, tuneless sound.

Brady smiled at his mother. "Sarah looks happy this morning," he said.

"Yes, she does." Her dark eyes warmed with her smile. "I expect you're on your way to school."

"As soon as I run upstairs and get my books."

He backed from the room, pulling the door closed so his little sister wouldn't escape. The house was pretty well "Sarah Proof," but he knew his mother worried that she might somehow get outside, wander away, and get lost. She probably wouldn't be scared, but who really knew with Sarah? It was doubtful she would even realize she was lost. Her mind was more two-years-old than six. But when she got hungry and tired, she'd scream bloody murder and throw seven kinds of fits. Probably then they could find her.

Upstairs, Brady deposited his morning's collection of prairie dog tails in the sack on his dresser. With these five, he now had twenty tails to turn in at the County Clerk's office for the two-cents bounty they were paying to be rid of the pesky animal. He hoped to get at least five more before Saturday when Mrs. Brewster came to stay with his mom and Sarah while he and his dad went into town.

The Miller twins always cut their prairie dog tails into two pieces, unless they were extra short ones, and got double their money. They bragged about how easy it was to fool Miss Cornish because she always took a fella at his word. But Brady knew he would never get away with it. He knew the minute Miss Cornish, who was so pretty she about took his breath away, looked up at him and said, "How many tails today, Brady?" that he would get red in the face and start to stammer. She would know then that he was lying.

Brady could imagine his sack of tails dumped out on her desk. Probably she'd spread out a newspaper first and use her pencil to poke through the tails to count them. She seemed pretty squeamish about those tails. He thought she'd probably give him a big lecture on lying, or report it to his dad... or the sheriff.

His dad never yelled. But he had a look that always made Brady feel lower'n a snake's belly, and when his dad was good and mad, if he spoke to him at all, it would be in short, curt sentences like he was biting off his words. If Miss Cornish told the sheriff, he might tell Grandpa Bud. Grandpa Bud was the

sheriff of Bunch County up near the Nebraska line, while they were the southern-most county in Kansas, right next to Oklahoma. But sheriffs were always contacting other sheriffs about stolen cars, or runaways, or something. He remembered his dad and Grandpa Bud talking about that when they were in Sentinel for Grandma Barbara's funeral two years ago. If Sheriff Bills had to call Grandpa Bud or send him a letter about some guy he was looking for, he just might mention that they had caught his grandson trying to cheat the county.

Not that he'd ever try to cheat anyway. Even if he got away with it, he would always feel guilty and the two cents extra he would get for each tail sure wouldn't be worth his conscience nagging him, even as scarce as money was these days.

He knew he didn't want to make his dad mad at him and he was pretty sure he wouldn't want Grandpa Bud to find out anything bad about him either. Grandpa Bud was a big man, well over six feet, with thick gray hair and pale blue eyes that looked to Brady like he could maybe see inside a fella's head.

Grandma Barbara had been tall too, her blond hair so pale it had hardly showed any gray, her warm blue eyes always crinkly with smiles. It was hard to believe she was dead.

He remembered how astounded he'd been when Grandpa Bud broke down and cried at her funeral. He had cried a little himself, especially when his mother had started crying. But Grandpa Bud was a grown man. He'd never imagined such a big man and the

sheriff to boot, to ever cry. But he guessed Grandpa Bud missed her as much as they all did.

She used to come down on the bus to see them several times a year, the last time just before she got cancer. Grandpa Bud never ever came with her and she always made excuses for him. Usually she laid the blame on to his sheriff's job, but his mother always said it was because her dad didn't like to sleep in any bed but this own. "Besides," she had added, "Dad has been the sheriff there so many years, now, he thinks the county would fall apart without him."

He knew his mother missed her dad, but he could sort of understand how Grandpa Bud felt about Bunch County. He had been born and raised there, just like Brady had been born on this farm. In just one week, it would be thirteen years ago. Dr. McKinley still mentioned coming out to deliver him on that dark and windy April night.

Although he and Grandpa Bud didn't look anything alike, they did share this feeling for home.

Brady wished his Grandpa Bud had taken more notice of him when they were there for Grandma Barbara's funeral, but he guessed he was just too sad. Besides he'd been pretty upset about Sarah. He must not have realized before just how different she was from other kids.

Grandpa Bud was sure his own doctor could help her, but Mom had explained to her dad that they'd been to all kinds of doctors.

"Most of them were no help at all," she'd said. "Then a doctor in Kansas City told us that in 1911 a Swiss psychiatrist, named Eugen Bleuler, started

calling what she has autism. The doctor told us he believed Sarah was born this way and nothing we do will ever change her condition.”

She'd sighed and pushed her fingers against her eyes like she was pushing back tears and finally said, “He told us to love her... To ... To...” She'd paused, sighed again, and his dad had spoken for her.

“The doctor said to accept her as she is, for to fight against what cannot be changed will only keep us upset, and not help Sarah at all.”

“Well, I can't see that one more doctor would hurt anything,” Grandpa Bud said.

But in a way, it had. His mother had come back from that doctor madder than he could ever remember seeing her before.

“An institutional setting!” she'd yelled, jerking her hat off and slamming it and her pocket book down on the kitchen table. “An institutional setting, he says. My Lord, she's only four years old!”

She had burst out crying then and Brady had about drawn blood biting down on his lip to keep his own tears inside.

When his mother had finally stopped sobbing, she had looked up at his dad, her face splotched and reddened, her dark brown eyes swimming in tears. “Oh, Jack,” she'd whispered. “Remember when she was a baby? She was fine then.”

Suddenly the soft pleading look in her eyes had given way to anger again and she had spit out the rest of her words like they were pieces of poison in her mouth. “She was fine! Fine! Until this horrible drought came!”

She had burst into tears again and his dad had drawn her into his arms. “Hush, Liddy. Hush,” he’d said.

Grandpa Bud had smoothed and pulled at his mustache like he did when he was nervous. Feeling uncomfortable himself, Brady had turned to look at Sarah.

Nothing moved Sarah. Not tears, not anger. Standing in the corner of the kitchen, she had been as unconcerned as ever, smiling her usual soft, secret smiles and flipping her little hands over and over in front of her face.

That was what made it so hard. Sarah paid no attention to anything or anyone.

She was so pretty with her blond curls and clear blue eyes, like their dad’s, while he had dark hair and eyes like their mother’s. She was a beautiful little girl, but whatever made one connect with people was missing in her. She seemed to care for no one, except maybe for herself.

A surge of anger had coursed through Brady. Anger at her indifference while their mother cried and their dad kept repeating, “Hush, Liddy. Hush.”

His dad always called their mother Liddy instead of Lydia, during those times, his tone of voice gentle and soothing. It reminded Brady of how his dad used to talk to their team of mules, Buck and Barney. Brady knew his dad missed those mules, but like he said, “A tractor does the work faster and doesn’t need to rest at all.”

It was a mystery to Brady why animals and, he guessed most people, were calmed by someone

talking to them and touching them, and yet Sarah just got more agitated. She hardly ever let anyone touch her and forget trying to hold her, for all you'd get would be struggles and screams. When you did let her loose, she'd run away in her funny little galloping gait, and when she was far enough away to suit her, she'd begin the ritual of her fingers, fluttering them like butterflies in front of her face. She made little clicking sounds with her tongue when she was upset and hummed when she was content and happy. She had never learned to speak and Brady wondered if she "talked to herself" with her humming and clicking sounds.

Grandma Barbara had called her a *Changeling*. But her words had been more fancy than fact. One evening when she was visiting them, he'd found his grandmother sitting on the edge of Sarah's bed, fingering her tumble of soft, blond curls and watching her sleep, as his mother often did. "My sweet changeling child," he'd heard her whisper.

"What's a changeling?" he'd asked, keeping his voice to a whisper, although once Sarah fell asleep it was hard to wake her. When she woke, she woke on her own and that might be at any time of the day or night.

At first she had been reluctant to tell him. He had pressed her, hoping, he guessed, that she had some explanation for Sarah's behavior.

"It's a kind of a fairy tale," Grandma Barbara finally said. "When I was a child, there was a beautiful, but strange-acting little boy in our neighborhood. An

old woman from church told me he was a changeling, a fairy child.”

“What?” Brady had said, frowning.

“A fairy child. She told me these children so perfect in looks, but so different in other ways, are fairy children. She said fairies come in the night and steal the human baby and leave one of their own in its place. Our world is confusing to the fairy child and the fairy child is confusing to us.” With a soft smile she’d reached out and patted his hand. “I know. It’s just a silly old grandma story.”

Brady wondered if Grandma Barbara had told his mother that story. He thought not. It was too fanciful and he was sure it wouldn’t make his mother feel any better. It would still hurt her to see Sarah act like she had no feelings at all for her family... not even for her mother. *Why in the dickens couldn’t Sarah be like other kids?*

Sometimes he wondered if this drought had affected her. Had maybe blown something in on the winds. Or was it because the world was coming to an end, like that old man Richards kept hollering that day in front of Sim’s Grocery?

It was all man’s fault, he had yelled. Everything from the stock market crash in ’29, which had caused these hard times, to the drought that plagued the land. It was all because man had sinned. “Repent,” he’d screamed. “The world is ending! Repent!”

Sheriff Bills had taken him to the state mental hospital. Probably the hospital where Grandpa Bud’s doctor had wanted them to put Sarah.

He shivered. “Someone is walking on your grave,” Jim Conners would say. But it wasn’t that. It was everything. It was Sarah... and his mother... She coughed almost all the time now and seemed to grow weaker every day. Dr. McKinley said she had asthma and the dirt and dust in the air was aggravating it.

Everyone prayed for rain, but the spattering of drops that did fall didn’t even settle the dust, let alone break the drought. He shuddered to think what would happen if it never rained again. Without rain, the fields smothered in silt and dust would be ruined forever. And his mother... She would only get worse. He thought of the old man’s words and he wondered now if maybe the world was coming to an end. At least the world they had always known.

Dust storms, rabbit drives, hobo camps, and riding on freight trains were all a part of life for many throughout the Midwest during the Great Depression. Polio and many other diseases had not yet been conquered and the huge dust storms that killed livestock and ruined crops also caused life-threatening respiratory ailments, such as asthma and pneumonia. In the spring of 1935, thirteen-year-old Brady Foster's family is forced to leave their "dusted out" wheat farm in southwest Kansas when his mother's asthma takes a turn for the worst. Deciding her only hope lies in California's cleaner air, Brady and his little autistic sister are sent to live with their grandfather, a county sheriff in the northcentral part of the state, until their parents can return. In his new school, Brady is bullied and ostracized, but he finds a friend in Eddie Peel, the son of the town drunk, a boy with a pet crow.



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