

Solitary Toes and Brown-Headed Cowbirds: A Hickory Doc's Tale

Linda Harkey

Mike Minick, Illustrator

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Illustrating integrity through a rivalry between animals, Solitary Toes and Brown-Headed Cowbirds is a fresh children's tale.

Linda Harkey's humorous picture book *Solitary Toes and Brown-Headed Cowbirds* personifies three hunting dogs and their race horse rival.

Doc, his brother Zeke, and their friend Deacon, who has three legs, are hunting dogs living at the Lazy Dog Hacienda. When their owner brings a race horse to the farm to help him hunt, the dogs are jealous. They engage in a rivalry that culminates in a challenge to prove one creature superior: hunting dog or race horse.

Divided into three sections, the book's structure is unique for a picture book. The first two pages are bogged down by a whirlwind of definitions and pedigree descriptions that aren't important to the plot. The first section of the story introduces the characters without plot or tension.

Narrated by Doc, the story's tone is friendly and conversational. The dogs refer to their owners at The Great One and The Other One, and when they first witness the race horse, they ponder what sort of dog she might be. There's a disconnect between the factual conveyance of breed information—regarding their hunting capabilities and biological need to pant—and the dogs doing things that dogs cannot do, like laughing.

Already running long for a picture book, each page of *Solitary Toes* also contains more text than is conventional. Some of the word choices are more advanced than the implied audience might be able to handle.

Full-color illustrations bring the action to life, though they are few and far between. Text pages are embellished with animal footprints along the bottom. The subtle differences between Doc and Zeke's artistic portrayals can make them difficult to distinguish from one another.

The ending is rushed, and the emotional conflict between the rivals is never resolved. Still, the story contains strong lessons about not cheating and about disabled characters prevailing in the face of adversity.

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TIA SMITH (April 18, 2019)

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