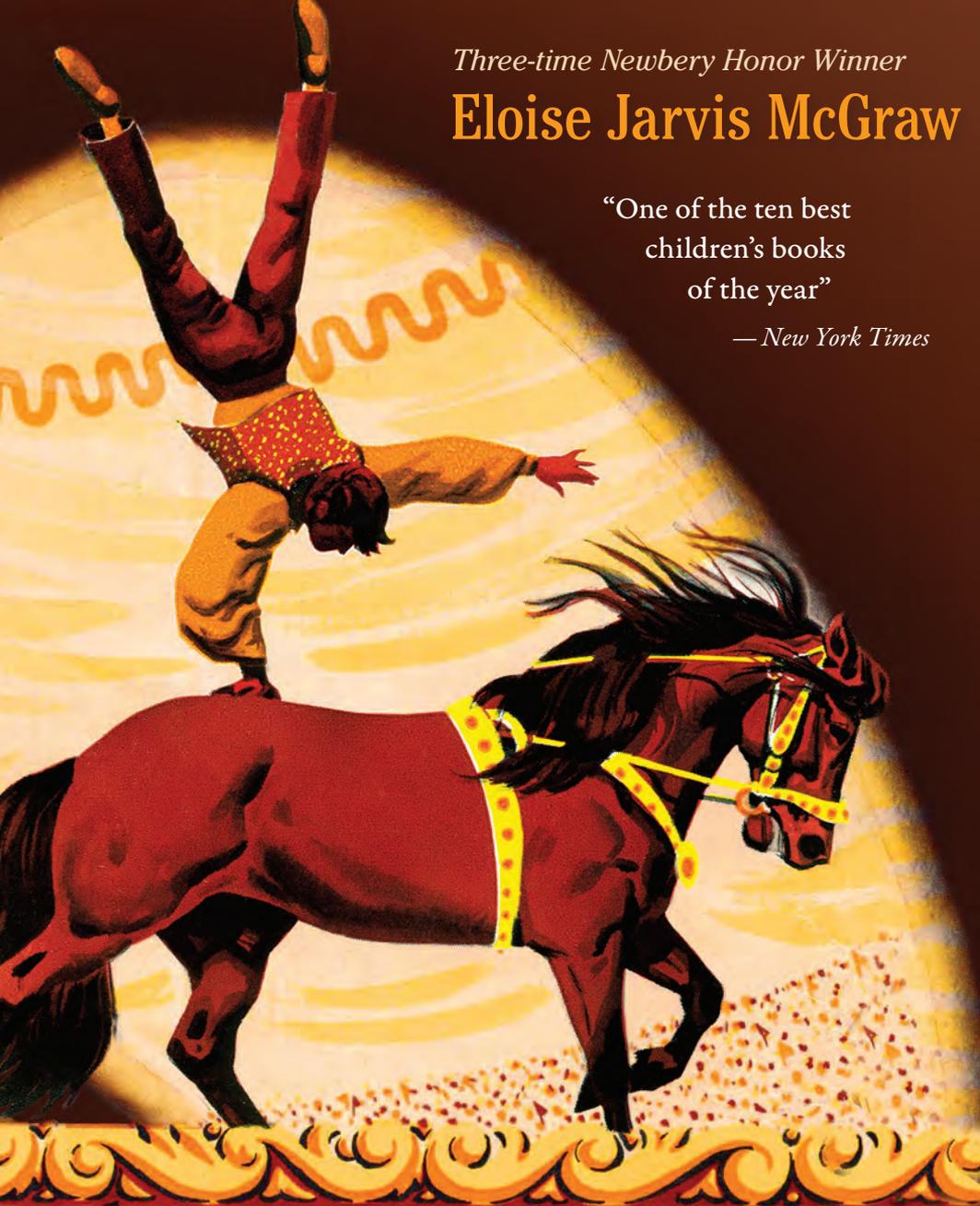


Three-time Newbery Honor Winner

Eloise Jarvis McGraw

“One of the ten best  
children’s books  
of the year”

— *New York Times*



Sawdust IN HIS Shoes



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*To my mother and father – also to “The Adventures of Johnny Black-Bug,” a merry saga inscribed nowhere but in my father’s head, my own memory, and the hearts of many children who have listened to it – this book is affectionately dedicated.*



**A**LL HIS LIFE Joe Lang was to remember that night – the night that tossed him into a new world.

It started out exactly as usual; he ate his dinner in the cook-tent with Mo Shapely the clown, and Dad and Etta. Then he and Mo walked over to the wagon they shared to dress for the evening performance. All around them were the sounds and smells of the circus – the chant of the guying-out crews, the rattle of cage doors, the stench of the animal tent, the sharp pungence of sawdust, and the shrill cries of a group of small boys enjoying a free-for-all in the dust behind the ringmaster’s wagon. They were sounds and smells that were as much a part of life to Joe as the air he breathed, for he had never been away from them in all his fifteen years.

Capper, the old collie, crawled out from under Mo’s bunk as they stepped into the wagon, and Joe reached over to scratch his ears while the clown switched on a light.

“Another show, another dollar!” remarked Mo as he straightened the shade of the lamp and set it on the little chest at the back of the wagon.

Joe grinned absently; it was an old joke. Mo couldn't start putting on his makeup until he'd said it. He pulled his jersey off over his head and glanced with satisfaction at the new costume – spangled blouse, sleeveless scarlet bolero jacket, and pearl-gray trousers – that hung on the door of the wardrobe. Mo caught the look and clapped him on the shoulder as he went to fish his own baggy pants and enormous shoes out of the trunk.

“They done a good job on your new rig, kid,” he commented. “Figure it’ll bring you good luck tonight?”

“It better!” retorted Joe. “It’s time I got the star billing in that troupe! Did you see the stall Marie pulled in the afternoon show?”

“Sure, I saw it. It’s getting so she needs a ladder to get up on a horse. Them Morelli sisters never were much good.”

“But Marie’s the worst of all!” Joe shook his head in disgust and dropped down on the edge of his bunk to take off his shoes. It was an outrage to his pride every time he stepped into a ring with the sisters. They were second rate performers; they were careless and sloppy in their movements. They were on their way down, while Joe was just beginning to come into his own.

Born in a circus wagon with the chants of the candy-butchers on the midway serving him as lullabies, he had grown up in a lusty atmosphere of rivalries and conflicts, had battled furiously with the other circus children over top billing before he even understood what the term meant. He had learned early to look after his own interests; it was the way to get along. You carried yourself boldly and

confidently, and lesser folk stepped back out of your way; if they didn't, you found out why, and if it meant a scrap that was all the better. And above all, you remembered you were a Lang and your act must be good enough to get star rating.

Joe had ridden his first horse when he was little more than a baby; at nine he was doing two shows a day and billed as the "Youngest Bareback Rider in the World." When he had grown too tall for a child's act he had slaved to learn more difficult feats, had taken a whole year off from performances to do it. And now that he was almost grown up, the manager had put him in with the Morellis!

"Marie kills the whole act, Mo, you know she does!" he fumed. "What am I doing playing second fiddle to those three has-beens? I'm fifteen now, and I've been in the ring since I could walk. When do you think Old Man Riley will let me star in a good troupe? Has he ever let slip anything to you?"

Mo turned his wizened, sad little face from the makeup mirror, drawing it down into an expression of comical despair. "Now, Joe," he begged. "Don't go calling Riley an old man in front of me! I was in show business when he was wearing short pants, and I ain't even a hundred yet! Fact of the matter is," he went on, picking up a stick of white grease paint and leaning over to frown at his image in the mirror, "Riley don't know a good rider when he sees one. You ought to of been in a star spot a year ago."

Joe sighed. "You should know. You taught me," he said. "Trouble is, you're not the manager, and Riley is!"

“Never you mind. It can’t be much longer. One of these days the folks out front’ll start hollering for you, and Riley’ll have to catch on. An audience knows good riding from bad, all right!”

“Them gillies!” Joe sniffed scornfully.

Mo whirled about and shook the grease paint admonishingly in Joe’s face. “Gillies they may be,” he said. “But they’re the folks that pay to get in. Don’t you ever forget it, kid.”

Joe grinned, and snapped at the grease stick with his teeth, laughing at the way Mo snatched it to his bosom: “I won’t forget,” he promised absently, and reached for the new costume. He drew the trousers over his long legs, admiring their silvery color. With the bright scarlet jacket they’d look plenty flash in the ring, he thought, a lot better than the old white ones. When he starred in a troupe of his own, he’d have a nice gray horse, to match.

Mo finished the last of his makeup and got up from the table, and Joe stepped over to the mirror eagerly, adjusting the scarlet jacket over his shoulders.

“How does it look, Mo?” he said, in as casual a tone as he could manage.

He knew already that it looked terrific. He stared at his own reflection in the mirror, at the dark, angular face with its bold black eyes and black hair, at the flashing red of the jacket and the muscular lean legs in their gray gabardine. His shoulders stiffened in the proud erectness that was characteristic as he met Mo’s eyes in the glass.

“Sa – ay!” commented the clown, and his white-painted face spread in a broad smile. “That’s all right, boy, that’s all

right! Turn around, let's have a look. What you blushing for, hey?"

Joe gave him an embarrassed shove and dropped into the chair, reaching for his own makeup box. In spite of Mo's teasing, he was so excited over the new rig that his hands shook a little as he applied the grease paint. The costume would bring him luck; he felt it in his bones.

Dad stuck his head in the door a few minutes later, on his way to the animal tent. "Serena's acting fidgety this evening," he explained, "and I've got to see if I can get her quieted down before the show starts. Wanted to see your new costume, though, son. I think it's great!"

Joe smiled his thanks, but he didn't get the same kick out of Dad's approval that he did out of Mo's. It had never been the same, with Dad, since he'd married Etta eight years ago. Before that, he'd done his best to be father and mother both to Joe, and they'd had a closeness that Joe prized above all else. He admired his father passionately, both as a man and a lion tamer, which Daniel Lang had been for twenty-five years. But you could never tell what would happen to a man when he was married to the wrong person. Etta was not of the circus. She hated the circus. And because to Joe the circus was everything, the only possible life, the two of them had been at sword's points since the beginning. She had robbed him of Dad, made Dad into a stranger. Only Mo had stuck by, unchanged.

Joe studied his father as he leaned in the doorway, wondering for the hundredth time how a man like that, who could handle lions and tigers as if they were rabbits,

would put up with a woman like Etta. Why didn't he crack the whip over *her* once in a while? She needed it worse than old Serena, the lioness. "Etta coming to watch the act tonight?" Joe asked, just to be saying something. He knew the answer already.

"Oh, not tonight. She's got one of her headaches, and besides, you know it makes her nervous to see me in the cage. She'll get over it one of these days."

"I'll get over what?" put in Etta herself, appearing beside Dad in the doorway. She put her arm through his and smiled up at him in that sugary way that always made crawlers go up Joe's back. He swung angrily around to the mirror, daubing the color on his neck with more violence than necessary, hearing Dad's voice answer with that tone of apology it always had when he talked to her.

"Well, who wouldn't get nervous?" she came back shrilly. "All those awful brutes in there, just waiting for a chance to eat you up—I won't ever get over it! I had a different upbringing, you know, not like these show women!"

Joe ground his teeth together, exchanged a black look with Mo, in the mirror. That upbringing of Etta's! They'd probably never hear the end of it. Just because she was born an ordinary gillie, she thought she was too good for circus life, and she couldn't quit talking about it. As if that were something to be proud of!

Joe flashed a look at her frizzed blond hair, her mouth whose very shape showed that it did nothing but nag and complain. He thought of his mother, who'd been born in a circus wagon, as he had been. She'd been on hand to watch

Dad's act every night of the world; one of Joe's earliest memories was the way she would stand in her pink velvet costume that she wore on the tightwire. She'd wait at the edge of the big tent for Dad's act to be over, then pat him on the back and tell him how good he was, and walk back to the wagon with him. If that was what Etta meant by "show women" she was right – she'd never be one. She didn't have the courage!

He threw down the eyebrow pencil in a burst of impatience. What was she hanging around for, anyway? "Did you want something special, Etta?" he asked stiffly.

Etta's face changed, and she put on the sweet, innocent look she used for Joe when Dad was around. "Oh, sure, honey, I forgot. If you'll give me those practice pants of yours I'll mend them for you tonight. I noticed a rip was starting."

Dad cut in hastily. "Now that's right nice of you, Etta, but don't worry with that this evening. Not with a headache. Joe can mend them himself, can't you, kid?"

Sure I can, thought Joe resentfully. I've done it all my life, since Mother died, and I guess once more won't hurt me. What's the pitch, anyway?

He eyed Etta with suspicion. Whenever she started acting sweet and helpful it meant she was trying to get something out of Dad. "I already sewed them up," he stated shortly. "You go on and enjoy your headache."

"Now, Joe –" began Dad, but Etta cut in.

"I try, Dan," she complained, shrugging. "Well, see you after the show."

She put her hand to her head with a weary gesture, and disappeared from the lighted doorway. Joe sighed with relief, and shoved the makeup box to one side.

“What time is it getting to be?” he asked as he stood up.

Mo glanced at his watch. “Nearly seven. Let’s go over with your dad and see what’s up with Serena.”

The three of them threaded their way through the jumble of wagons toward the animal tent. Dad was silent, flicking his whip against his shiny black boot as he walked.

“You could try and be a little nicer to Etta, Joe,” he said after a minute. “After all, you don’t have to see much of her since you moved in with Mo. She’s a fine girl, when you know her.”

“Sorry, Dad,” mumbled Joe. “We just don’t seem to hit it off.”

He sighed, thinking of the time before he’d begun bunking in Mo’s wagon. A fine girl, was she? Well, he’d got to know her pretty well in those days, when he’d been small enough to whip. Of course she’d never let Dad see any of that, but he had vivid memories of going to sleep crying, with his whole back sore.

I wish she’d try it now, he thought, stiffening with the old rage. She’d run into a little trouble.

He stopped in front of Serena’s cage, staring at her without seeing her, his mind busy with the problem of Etta. Then he realized that Mo was tugging at his arm.

“Let’s go,” whispered the clown. “Your dad can handle her better if we ain’t here.”

“Okay,” Joe said, “See you in the ring, Dad!” he called over his shoulder, then on a sudden impulse he turned and

came back. “I’ll try to do better – about Etta, I mean. I know it’s rough on you, Dad.”

“Don’t worry, son,” said his father with a smile. He clapped Joe on the shoulder. “Do your best tonight – you got to live up to that new rig, you know!”

Joe grinned in return, made him a mock salute, and followed Mo out of the tent. He felt better, somehow, having said that. Dad was a great guy, underneath. The greatest in the world.

Always afterward, he was glad the little scene had taken place.

They strolled about the grounds, he and Mo, as they loved to do, watching the lights snap on and the whole circus gather itself for the burst of gaiety that was a performance. The guying-out crews were making their final check on the ropes and stakes. Out on the midway, the grifters whom Mr. Riley pretended not to see were gathering behind the side-show banner line, preparing their games of chance. Near Joe and the clown in the “back yard,” old Oscar, the bull-man, was lining his elephants up for the opening parade; Tony Fuccini, eldest son of the family of aerialists known as the Flying Fuccinis, emerged from his wagon just in front of them. Joe grinned and waved. He and Tony had grown up together, and had discovered their biceps in the course of giving each other black eyes. These had finally become so numerous that the manager had threatened to sack them both if they showed up once more in the ring looking like battle-scarred gladiators. They’d had to stop scrapping with the championship undecided.

