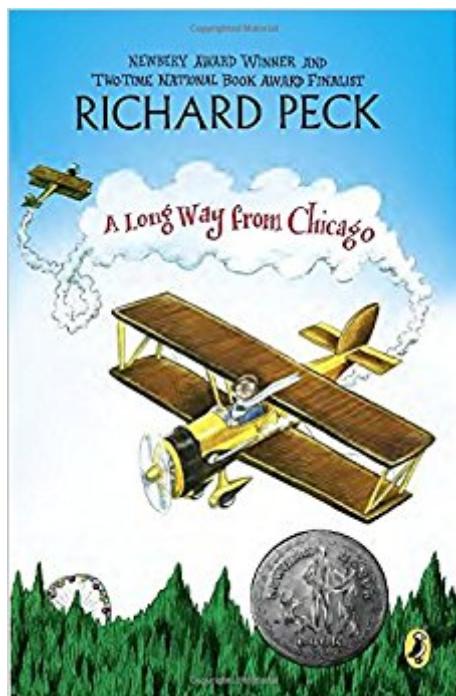


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# A Long Way From Chicago: A Novel In Stories



## Synopsis

A Newbery Honor BookA summer they'll never forget. Each summer Joey and his sister, Mary Alice, two city slickers from Chicago, visit Grandma Dowdel's seemingly sleepy Illinois town. Soon enough, they find that it's far from sleepy...and Grandma is far from your typical grandmother. From seeing their first corpse (and he isn't resting easy) to helping Grandma trespass, catch the sheriff in his underwear, and feed the hungry—all in one day. Joey and Mary Alice have nine summers they'll never forget! "A rollicking celebration of an eccentric grandmother and childhood memories." —School Library Journal, starred review "Each tale is a small masterpiece of storytelling." —The Horn Book, starred review "Grandma Dowdel embodies not only the heart of a small town but the spirit of an era gone by...Remarkable and fine." —Kirkus Reviews, starred reviewA Newbery Honor BookA National Book Award FinalistAn ALA Notable BookAn ALA Best Book for Young Adults

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Peck (Strays Like Us) first created the inimitable central figure of this novel in a previously published short story. Although the narrator, Joey, and his younger sister, Mary Alice, live in the Windy city during the reign of Al Capone and Bugs Moran, most of their adventures occur "a long way from Chicago," during their annual down-state visits with Grandma Dowdel. A woman as "old as the hills," "tough as an old boot," and larger than life ("We could hardly see her town because of Grandma. She was so big, and the town was so small"), Grandma continually astounds her citified grandchildren by stretching the boundaries of truth. In eight hilarious episodes spanning the years

1929-1942, she plots outlandish schemes to even the score with various colorful members of her community, including a teenaged vandal, a drunken sheriff and a well-to-do banker. Readers will be eager to join the trio of Grandma, Joey and Mary Alice on such escapades as preparing an impressive funeral for Shotgun Cheatham, catching fish from a stolen boat and arranging the elopement of Vandalia Eubanks and Junior Stubbs. Like Grandma Dowdel's prize-winning gooseberry pie, this satire on small-town etiquette is fresh, warm and anything but ordinary. Ages 9-12. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Grade 4-8-A rollicking celebration of an eccentric grandmother and childhood memories. Set in the 1930s, the book follows Joe and Mary Alice Dowdel as they make their annual August trek to visit their grandmother who lives in a sleepy Illinois town somewhere between Chicago and St. Louis. A woman with plenty of moxie, she keeps to herself, a difficult task in this small community. However, Grandma Dowdel uses her wit and ability to tell whoppers to get the best of manipulative people or those who put on airs. She takes matters into her own hands to intimidate a father who won't control his unruly sons, and forces the bank to rescind a foreclosure on an elderly woman's house. Whether it's scaring a pretentious newspaper man back to the city or stealing the sheriff's boat and sailing right past him as he drunkenly dances with his buddies at the Rod & Gun Club, she never ceases to amaze her grandchildren with her gall and cunning behavior. Each chapter resembles a concise short story. Peck's conversational style has a true storyteller's wit, humor, and rhythm. Joe, the narrator, is an adult looking back on his childhood memories; in the prologue, readers are reminded that while these tales may seem unbelievable, "all memories are true." Perfect for reading aloud, *A Long Way from Chicago* is a great choice for family sharing. Shawn Brommer, Southern Tier Library System, Painted Post, NYCopyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Thanks to a librarian friend of mine, I've been slowly making my way through a long list of books she recommended, and thanks to her, I've been discovering a new slew of reading material I otherwise would've never given a second glance. Case in point, this short little novel that can be breezed through in an afternoon, yet contains some of the most outrageous and funny stories you'll ever hear about living in the countryside during the early years of the 20th century. Set during the years of 1929 to 1942, during the times of Al Capone, two siblings, Joey, and his younger sister, Mary Alice, are sent during the summer, every year, to spend a week away from Chicago, out in the countryside, with their grandma. But their vacations with her are anything but boring, and grandma

is far from your average, quiet homemaker. She's arguably the toughest person in town, and when one spends a day with her, you never know what you're in for. We're taken through nine short episodes as the kids grow up and get into all sorts of misadventures with their grandma, from cheating their way to a free plane ride, feeding some local drifters without getting caught by the sheriff, helping two star crossed lovers elope, and getting back at a group of teenage vandals, among other, even more outlandish schemes. The book does a great job of painting a vivid picture of what life was like back in the olden days. But even reading it today, the audience can still greatly relate to (or at least get a laugh) out of this small town community and its many wacky residents. Everyone knows everyone, and secrets can't be kept for long, least of all, from Grandma Dowel, who's tough as nails and doesn't take kindly to manipulative or stuck up people. And the various situations she gets her grandchildren into are at turns harrowing--at other turns, hilarious, but all end with grandma coming out on top. (My personal favorite being the one about her trying to win a pie baking contest. I won't spoil the ending, but let's just say that sometimes it really IS best not to cheat...) But for all her grit and moxie, it quickly becomes apparent that under grandma's tough exterior, there DOES lie a heart of gold that cares for the decent people in town, such as when she helps two young lovers escape their abusive parents; goes illegal fishing to feed the homeless, and helps a friend to not lose her house. She stands up for what she believes to be right, and isn't afraid to fight for it, whether it's using her wits or her handy shotgun. And as the kids eventually learn, love and care can come in many forms, even if it's not totally visible at first... A fun and lively series of stories, this book is the perfect read for anyone who's either grown up on a farm, or in a small or quiet town. If you've known anyone like Grandma Dowel, then you know you're in for a wild ride.

I was working in a middle school and I noticed this book sitting on a shelf. When I picked it up to browse through it, a student commented how it was one of his favorite books. I read it and loved it so much I ended up buying a copy for my own library. I indicated there was some violence because the grandma is very handy with the shot gun and everyone in town knows not to mess with her. Nobody is killed, just scared off. There were parts that I found to be laugh-out-loud funny.

To my surprise, *A Long Way from Chicago* by Richard Peck is a novel told in stories rather than a straightforward narrative. As I began to dip into the stories, I also discovered that the real heroine of this short story cycle isn't a young person but Grandma Dowdel. Despite not being what I expected, I enjoyed Peck's touching and funny novel. Eight stories depict several summer vacations as spent by Joey and Alice with their grandmother who lives in a rural

Illinois town. The first tale starts with the riveting line, “You wouldn’t think we’d have to live Chicago to see a dead body.” No truth was better spoken for not even the big city crimes of Chicago offered as much excitement to the two siblings than the larger-than-life Grandma Dowdel who tricks a reporter into believing in ghosts, rescues the town from the terror of the Cowgill boys, sets illegal fish traps to feed drifters, bakes a pie to save her town’s honor, comes to the aid of mismatched lovers, outwits a banker, and has a showdown with her closet friend over whose family has the world’s oldest veteran. Each lengthy story is narrated by grandson Joey, as he looks back to share adventures riveting enough to make your heart race and reflective memories of his grandmother that will make you smile. The latter results in poignant lines such as “there are all different kinds of truth and we all grow up faster than we wish.” Not only does rural Illinois offer more excitement than Chicago, but Grandma Dowdel is far from your ordinary relative. Whether or not her deceased husband used a twelve-gauge, double-barreled Winchester Model 21 to ducks, it comes in handy more than once against trespassers and supposed ghosts. In front of her grandchildren, she tells whoppers to a reporter and deliberately pretends her milk has been spoiled by neighborhood hoodlums drowning mice in it. She also sets illegal traps to catch catfish and steals a boat from the town sheriff. I could go on, but I’m sure you get the idea from my list that Grandma Dowdel isn’t above playing the part of a con artist or even of breaking the law. Now the truth is she’s kind of like a Robin Hood and all other those outlaws who felt serving the people gave them a right to their actions. Despite being a reclusive, Grandma Dowdel makes it a point to help keep law and order in her community, feed the hungry and homeless, ensure her grandson won his coveted ride on an airplane, and keep the bank from foreclosing on the house of her sworn enemy and friend. Her influence becomes on her grandchildren becomes apparent when they become involved in their own charade. All eight stories are memorable but I have to admit my favorite is “The Day of Judgement.” In this short, the town banker’s wife asks Grandma Dowdel to bake a pie for the country fair. The town wishes to keep their name in front of the public and believes Grandma can do it with her gooseberry pie. To convince Grandma, a ride is even offered to both her and the grandchildren. Grandma spent three busy days preparing for that fair. In the end though, she couldn’t pull off first prize. I like this story best, because it shows a vulnerable side to an otherwise tough woman. The town felt fine with the results, because a second place ribbon still did them well. She however had her pride and her grandson to consider. The first-place winner would win a ride in the airplane and

Grandma desired this prize for Joey. This week has given me a promising introduction to Richard Peck, but already I wish to check out more of his writings. To date, I have read his memoir, some of his poetry and short story collections, and *A Long Way Home* from Chicago. In other words, I still need to regular one of his more straightforward novels.

FUN! Also read the follow-up book to this one - "A Year Down Yonder", which was even better. Looking forward to reading more of Richard's books.

I didn't like the narrator for this book. He didn't do voices, he sounded quite elderly, which isn't bad since the book is a remembrance, but it was distracting. I LOVE LOVE this book, the narrator just didn't do it justice.

This is a great book. I read it to a middle school reading class and even gave it to my mother in law. She loved it. It takes place in rural Illinois during the depression. Two children spend their summers with Grandma Dowdle and she is everything you don't expect. I've read other books by this author and enjoyed every one.

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