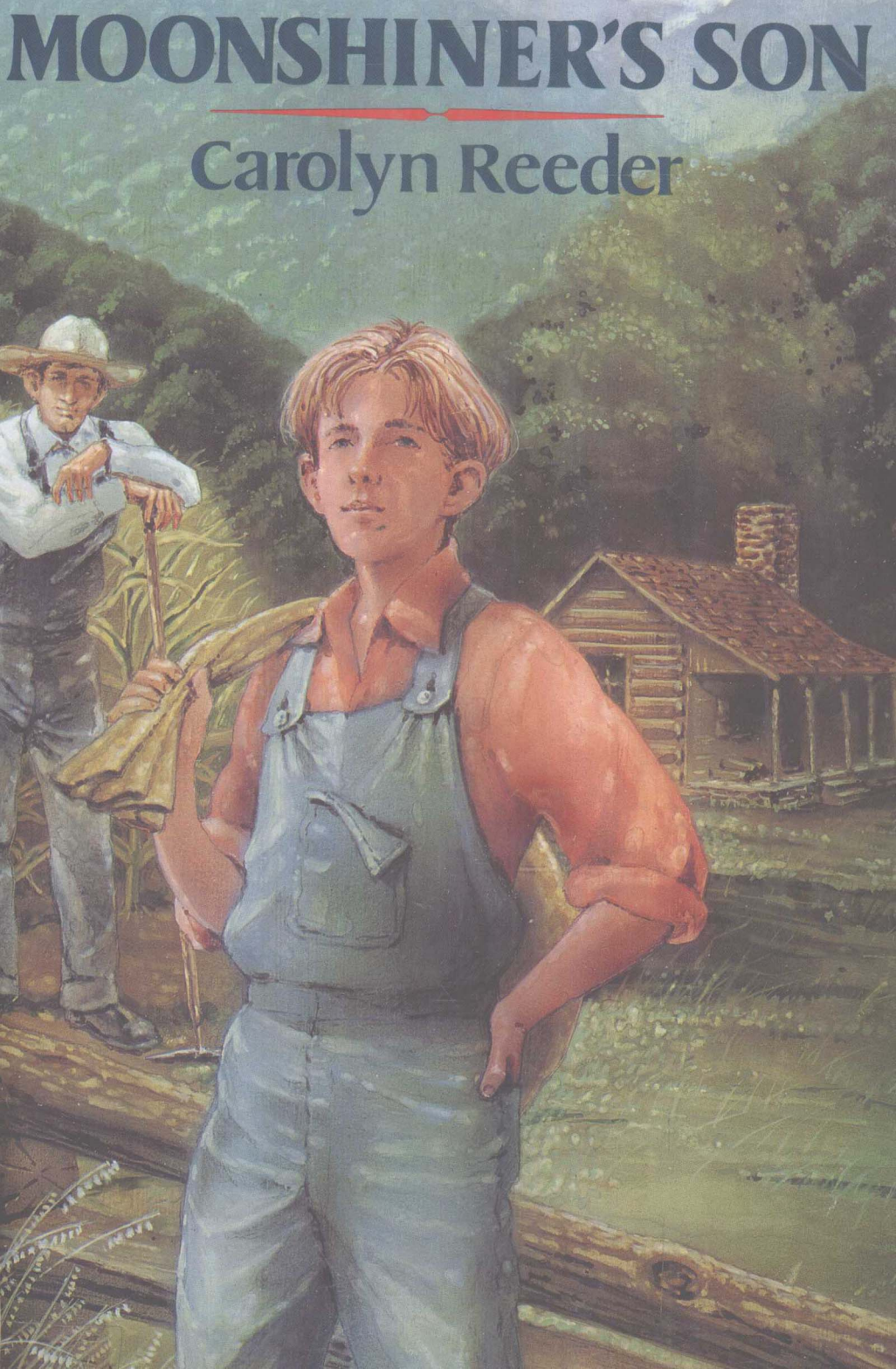
MOONSHINER'S SON

Carolyn Reeder



At twelve, Tom Higgins is learning the craft of making whiskey. Even though Prohibition forbids the production and sale of alcoholic beverages, Tom is determined to be a good apprentice. He is, after all, a moonshiner's son. Moreover, his father has raised moonshining to an art, and Tom wants nothing more than to please this rough, distant man.

Then a preacher comes to the wilds of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, to rid Bad Camp Hollow of the "evils of liquor." His pretty daughter is equally intent on doing so, and Tom soon catches the girl throwing salt into his father's mash. This is when Tom and his father begin their campaign to match wits with the preacher and try to outsmart the law officers he calls in.

In his own manner, Tom's father is eloquent in defense of a way of life long and respectably lived by the Higgins family. But the preacher and his daughter make a powerful case against it. And when drink causes a tragedy in the community, Tom Higgins is torn.

In her third historical novel set in Virginia, Carolyn Reeder shows us the traditions and values, as well as the cleverness and humor of the mountain people, for whom she cares deeply.

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CAROLYN REEDER is the author of *Grandpa's Mountain*, a novel that "dramatizes the human cost of eminent domain and the deep love people have for their homes, as well as the wisdom of accepting what cannot be changed" (ALA *Booklist*), and *Shades of Gray*, the story of a boy who "learns that issues aren't always black and white and that honorable people may hold vastly different opinions" (ALA *Booklist*). The latter received the Scott O'Dell Award, the Child Study Association Award, and the Jefferson Cup Award, was named an ALA Notable Book, and was selected as an Honor Book for the Jane Addams Children's Book Award. A reading teacher who knows the Blue Ridge Mountains well, Carolyn Reeder lives with her husband in Glen Echo, Maryland.

Macmillan Publishing Company
866 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10022

Printed in U.S.A.

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MACMILLAN PUBLISHING COMPANY NEW YORK
MAXWELL MACMILLAN CANADA TORONTO
MAXWELL MACMILLAN INTERNATIONAL
NEW YORK OXFORD SINGAPORE SYDNEY

Macmillan Publishing Company is part of the Maxwell Communication Group of Companies. Macmillan Publishing Company, 866 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10022. Maxwell Macmillan Canada, Inc., 1200 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 200, Don Mills, Ontario M3C 3N1
First edition
Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The text of this book is set in 11 point Meridien.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Reeder, Carolyn.
Moonshiner's son / Carolyn Reeder. — 1st ed.
p. cm.
Summary: As he works with his father making moonshine in the remote hills of Virginia during Prohibition, twelve-year-old Tom learns about hard work and independent thinking.
ISBN 0-02-775805-2
[1. Fathers and sons—Fiction. 2. Mountain life—Virginia—Fiction. 3. Prohibition—Fiction.] I. Title. PZ7.R25416Mo 1993
[Fic]—dc20 92-39570

For my daughter, Linda

MOONSHINER'S SON

1

Tom lay flat on his stomach in the laurel thicket. He blew at the gnats that had been pestering him all day and tried to ignore the high-pitched hum of the sweat bee hovering around his ear. A towhee scratched in the leaves a few yards away, chirping its "Sweet bird-eeee!" call at regular intervals. The only other sound was the bubbling and spitting of the barrels of mash fermenting beside the creek, screened by the branches of a fallen tree.

"If they're comin', they'd better come soon," Tom muttered. He didn't want to spend a third day like this, and Pa couldn't relish another night hunkered down, waiting to see if whoever had shortened his last run of whiskey by pouring salt into one of the mash barrels was going to do it again.

Who could it have been? Tom went over the possibilities in his mind for the hundredth time. A revenuer wouldn't have advertised his presence by tampering with the mash—he'd have kept watch and caught the moonshiner and then destroyed the still. Tom frowned. What kind of man poured salt into a mash barrel, anyway? An angry man would have smashed it open. And a coward—or Eddie Jarvis, who coveted Pa's customers—would have told the sheriff where to find the still and let the law do his dirty work.

For a moment Tom wondered if someone could have done it as a joke, but he quickly discarded that idea. Messing around with a man's still was no joking matter. It wasn't something you did if you wanted to keep on living.

Suddenly a squirrel's scolding chatter made Tom's heartbeat quicken. Listening now, he heard splashing. Somebody was coming up the creek, and not even trying to be quiet about it!

Tom blinked in astonishment as a piebald horse came into view, making its way up the gravelly creek bed. Peering through the laurel growing near the bank, Tom could see the rider's high black boots. He held his breath, hoping the horse would pass him, but it stopped and the rider dismounted.

Tom's mouth dropped open. It was a girl! And she was wearing fancy riding pants like the ones in that mail-order catalog he'd seen at the Rigsbys' house. Tom watched, scarcely breathing, while the girl unbuckled the flap of her saddlebag and lifted something out. Tom raised his head a little. It looked like—it *was!* It was a five-pound sack of salt.

Ignoring the branches that scraped along his spine, Tom scuttled backward till he could stand up. Then he forced his way forward through the almost impenetrable greenery until he stood on the low creek bank, looking down at the girl.

She let the salt fall to the ground and stood facing him, an opened penknife in her hand. Tom grinned. You'd never see a knife like that at Ol' Man Barnes's store down in the settlement, he thought, looking at its tiny blade.

"Don't you come any closer," the girl warned. Her dark hair was pulled back into a thick braid, and her wide brown eyes were steady.

Suddenly conscious of his rumpled shirt and overalls and his unruly mop of sandy hair, Tom slid down the sloping bank and stood on the damp ground, opposite the girl. "You don't belong here," he said, trying to sound authoritative, like Pa. "Put away your pretty li'l knife an' go on back to where you come from."

Slowly the girl lowered her arm, but she made no move to leave. The horse, its nostrils quivering, was trying to force its way through the branches of the fallen tree that hid the mash barrels, and Tom quickly took the reins and turned the animal away. "Now git on, an' git out of here," he told the girl.

"I'll leave when I've done what I came to do, and not before," she said, her chin lifted defiantly.

In one swift movement, Tom leaned over and scooped up the sack of salt.

"Give me that. It's mine!" the girl demanded.

Tom shook his head. "I'm gonna"—he searched for the word—"*confiscate* it. Now git!"

The girl's eyes blazed with anger, and she didn't move.

Tom shrugged and tossed the sack into the shallow creek. "Folks hereabouts don't take kindly to anybody messin' 'round near their stills," he said sternly, turning back to the girl.

"Stills are illegal! Haven't you heard of Prohibition?"

Tom scowled. He'd heard of Prohibition, all right. How he hated the 1919 law that sent even more law officers into the hills to look for stills to destroy and moonshiners to arrest. Until two years ago, federal revenue agents had searched out moonshiners because they paid no taxes on the whiskey they made in secret. But now the revenuers came to enforce the new law against making or selling alcoholic drinks anywhere in the United States.

"I've heard of Pro'bition, all right," Tom said, "but maybe you ain't never heard of trespassin'. Trespassin's illegal, too," he said, "an' you're on my pa's land." He saw a flicker of concern cross the girl's face and pressed his advantage. "What would your people say if they knew you was trespassin'? An' if they found out you was foolin' 'round somebody's still?"

"They aren't going to find out," she said, but she didn't sound so confident now. She turned away from Tom and mounted her horse. "Anyway," she said, looking over her shoulder, "running a still is a lot worse than trespassing." With that, she tossed her head and rode downstream without looking back.

Tom gave the girl a long head start before he set off for home, glad he didn't have to lie hidden in the laurel thicket any longer. He splashed down the creek until it flowed across a narrow path, where he turned uphill. He was panting by the time the path intersected a wider trail that led further up the mountain.

As he neared the cabin and saw his father working in the corn patch on the hillside, Tom called, "Pa! Hey, Pa! I found out who spoilt our mash!"

The burly man leaned on his hoe and said with mock ferocity, "I hope you don't expect me to believe it was a brown-eyed li'l gal on a piebald horse."

"How—how did you know?" Tom stammered.

Pa threw back his head and laughed. "Set yourself down under that there tree, an' I'll tell you."

Surprised to find Pa in such good humor, Tom followed him to the shade of the white oak that towered over their cabin. Pa leaned back against its trunk, and Tom sat cross-legged, facing him.

"Wal," Pa began, "I thought I'd walk on down to the store to buy a pound of coffee an' hear the news, an' while I was there, this li'l gal rode up, wearin' some of them pants that make 'em look like their hips has slid halfway to their knees. She marched right into the store and asked for a sack of salt. A *bag* of salt, she called it.

"After Ol' Man Barnes got it for her, he said she was more 'n welcome to git a drink from the pump over by his house, since she must be mighty thirsty. An' when she allowed as how she didn't know what he meant, he said, 'If your ma's used up all that salt you bought here last week, I'd think you'd have a powerful thirst.' "

Tom grinned appreciatively. Pa sure knew how to tell a tale.

"Then she told him that there salt weren't for her ma, so I ask, real surprised like, 'You mean to say it's for your *pa?*' But she shakes her head an' says she's buyin' it for herself, an' out she goes. Last I seen her, she was ridin' up the trail."

Remembering how the girl had stood up to him, Tom asked, "What's a girl like her doin' 'round here, anyway?"

"Her pa's the preacher settin' up that mission down at the ol' Ollie Gentry place. He's the one that's been ridin' through Ox Gore Holler talkin' about the evils of drink," Pa said contemptuously.

Tom scowled. Weeks ago, he'd listened while Ol' Man Barnes had read the newspaper story telling how some city church was planning to set up a mission here in the hills. The storekeeper had repeated the last sentence twice, and Tom hadn't forgotten it: "It is hoped that the mission will provide a civilizing influence on the lawless and unlettered people in this wild area of the Virginia Blue Ridge."

Pa's voice brought Tom back to the present. "That preacher hired men from Buckton to come out an' fix up the house, since nobody 'round here would work for him. Eddie Jarvis tried to run them workmen off, but the preacher was there with 'em, an' he stood right up to Eddie—said he was wearin' the armor of the Lord an' he wasn't scared of no shotgun." Pa paused to let that sink in and then mused, "That man's either powerful brave, or else he's a fool."

Tom thought he must be a fool if he couldn't see he wasn't welcome here. Unless he just plain didn't care.

"What I can't figger out," Pa said, changing the subject, "is how that slip of a gal happened on my still."

"She rode up the creek," Tom said.

Pa's good humor vanished. "Dadburn it, boy! Did you empty the slop from the still into the creek even though I told you to carry it to the hogs?"

"I carried most of it to the hogs, but—"

"But some of it you dumped in the creek," Pa broke in angrily. "Trust you to work by yourself, an' next thing I know somebody finds their way to my still!"

Tom didn't see the connection, but he wasn't about to ask. When Pa was mad, the best thing to do was keep quiet and stay out of his way.

"Don't you know you're as good as advertisin' the location of your still if you dump your slop in the creek when you clean it out?"

Tom shook his head, not daring to speak.

"Dadburn revenuer's horse'll give you away every time. Most of 'em turn up their noses an' won't drink water with the smell of mash in it, but if you git one that likes it, he'll follow the stream right up to your still. Either way,