

Maryellen Larkin Character Descriptions

Maryellen

She is energetic, exuberant, optimistic, and bursting with ideas. She wants to be seen as a unique individual and not lumped in with her siblings. Like any 9- or 10-year-old girl, she wants to fit in with her friends at school—but only if she can be true to herself.

Dad

He's an easygoing, fun-loving father and works in Daytona Beach as an architect. He occasionally travels for business.

Mom

She's basically a relaxed, low-key mother, but with 6 kids she still becomes a bit frazzled at times. During WWII, before she had a big family, she was a line manager at an aircraft factory. She likes being a homemaker, but thinks she might go back to work when her youngest starts school.

Joan (age 17-18)

Maryellen's oldest sister is neat & tidy—and sometimes a bit critical of impulsive, creative Maryellen. Her fiancé is Jerry (they get married at the end of Book 2).

Carolyn (age 14-15)

Maryellen's second sister kind and understanding, blunt (sometimes to a fault), and plays the piano.

Beverly (Age 6-7)

Maryellen's little sister dresses up (and acts) like a queen. She teaches Maryellen how to ice skate.

Tom (Age 4) & Mikey (almost 2)

Maryellen's messy little brothers, who like to follow her and be where the action is!

Scooter

The Larkin family's dog, a plump, lazy, easygoing dachshund.

Davy Fenstermacher (9)

Maryellen's best friend, who lives next door. They like to act out TV shows together.

The Karens & Angela (9)

The Karens are Maryellen's best friends at school. Angela is a new girl at school who comes from Italy.

Jerry

Joan's boyfriend, who becomes her fiancée and, by the end of the series, her husband.

Historical Overview

A Paradoxical Time

The 1950s are commonly perceived as a simpler time and as a golden age of peace and prosperity. The U.S. emerged after WW2 as a world power, and technology promised to make life better for everyone. The mass production of goods, the growth of suburbs full of tidy new homes, and images of American family life carefully crafted and widely purveyed by media and advertisements—all sent messages of conformity. But the 1950s were paradoxical: The new technology that brought amenities like household appliances also brought social changes and even fear (e.g. the atomic bomb and the Cold War). Television sitcoms promoted images of clean-cut, happy families, but the nightly news brought different images of the wide, complicated world into people's living rooms. The new interstate highways let families "See the U.S.A. in your Chevrolet" and see how they were like other Americans—but they could see how they were different from other people, too. Despite the powerful media messages of conformity, anyone who was paying attention could see that these did not always reflect reality or tell the truth.

Optimism, Confidence, and Middle Class Prosperity

The 1950s were years of peace, prosperity, promise, and exuberant growth. The Great Depression and World War Two were over, the U.S. was the most powerful nation in the world, and the economy was booming. Families were booming, too, and big families like Maryellen's were not unusual. In fact, so many children were born that the period became known as the "Baby Boom" (officially, 1946-1964). Jobs were plentiful as industries switched from making wartime products to making goods for families to buy. Homeowners like the Larkins were proud of their new appliances and modern conveniences, and neighbors would often gather to admire big new purchases such as cars and televisions. Many former soldiers went to college on the G.I. Bill, and more young women began attending college than ever before, much like Joan and Jerry in the stories. All of these trends created rapid growth of a prosperous and confident middle class. Middle-class children like Maryellen had comfortable lives, with more opportunities for education, good health, and entertainment than any previous generation of children.

Story Themes

Suburbia

Brand new neighborhoods full of homes, each with a yard and driveway, popped up all over America to house the millions of growing families. It was faster and cheaper for a builder to build the same house over and over, so many suburbs had identical homes, as in Maryellen's neighborhood of The Palms. The rise of suburbia was seen most dramatically in the sunbelt, where land was relatively cheap, and by the mid-50s, Florida's population was growing faster than any other state because of the rapid growth of its suburbs, including Maryellen's hometown of Daytona Beach.

Television

Although television had been invented before WWII, it was little more than a scientific curiosity sometimes exhibited at fairs, and there were no broadcast networks or programs to watch. After the war, as manufacturers began pumping out consumer goods, televisions began to be manufactured for home use and network programming began, along with TV advertising, which paid for the shows. By the mid-50s, many families had a set in their living room, where they would gather to watch popular comedies such as *I Love Lucy*, Westerns such as *The Lone Ranger*, and variety shows such as *The Ed Sullivan Show*. The shows were all in black and white, and only a few channels were available, so most people saw the same news shows, programs, and advertisements. This gave newscasters and advertisers great power to shape the public's view of life, which they didn't always depict accurately. For example, women were usually shown as housewives even though millions of women worked outside the home. And except for a few Indians in Westerns, almost everyone on TV was white. These things were also seen in Hollywood movies, but because television was watched daily in people's homes, it was even more influential in shaping public views.

Fitting In vs. Being Different

Americans whose lives didn't match the television version sometimes felt out of step—sort of the way Maryellen felt about Christmas in sunny, sandy Florida. Advertisers and manufacturers encouraged Americans to fit in by “keeping up with the Joneses” and having cars and appliances that were as nice as their neighbors', so that people would buy lots of new goods. Even the government encouraged conformity. Although the U.S.A. was not officially at war with Russia, the two countries were deeply suspicious of each other and had a hostile relationship known as the Cold War. People who were suspected of friendly feelings toward Russia could be “black-listed”—fired from their jobs and questioned by the government. When this happened, often their former friends also avoided them and treated them badly. In her stories, Maryellen feels this pressure to conform when she is “black-listed” by her other friends for being friendly with Angela, the Italian girl.

Story Themes

The Polio Vaccine

In 1954, polio was a big deal; families feared it almost as much as the atomic bomb, because the disease usually struck children. It often started like the flu, with a fever, aches, and weakness, but it could last many months and cripple or even kill the patient. There was no cure, so patients were kept in isolation wards, until they recovered. Finally, when the Salk vaccine was announced, the entire nation celebrated. Still, some parents feared that a vaccination, which put a form of the virus into a person's body, might make their children sick. So doctors and health organizations worked to promote the vaccine, with great success. As a result, the United States has been polio free since 1980.

The Space Race

The 1950s brought other major scientific advances. In fall 1955, when Maryellen's flying-machine contest takes place, the U.S. government began a project to launch a rocket into orbit. When Russia launched its own rocket, Sputnik, first, America began pouring money into what became known as the "Space Race." After several failed attempts, in 1958 a small solar-powered satellite, Vanguard 1, was finally launched from Cape Canaveral, Florida. (Today, it's the oldest man-made satellite still orbiting the earth!)

Car Travel

Along with new discoveries in science, Americans were also discovering their country. With the booming economy, more Americans than ever before had cars—and paid vacations. Popular TV shows like Davy Crockett and The Lone Ranger made many families want to see the real "Wild West," so they began taking long car trips for their vacations, often to Yellowstone and other western parks. Many families bought campers for this purpose. The Airstream trailer, with its streamlined, Space Age look, was one of the most popular and admired brands.

Key Settings

Daytona Beach, Florida

Maryellen lives in a subdivision in Daytona Beach called The Palms, a classic post-war suburb with ranch houses that all look alike. It's a safe and friendly neighborhood for Maryellen and her friends to play and ride bikes. A few blocks from Maryellen's house is the beach, and Maryellen often walks there with her siblings and friends.

Maryellen's House

Maryellen lives in a yellow one-story ranch house, with a driveway and carport (no garage), and palm trees and a rope-and-board swing in the yard that hangs off the branch of a hardwood tree. The house has only 3 bedrooms, so Maryellen shares a bedroom with her 3 sisters. This arrangement was her idea, and she calls it the All Girls Room.

The Georgia Mountains

Maryellen's grandparents live in a modest house up in the mountains a few hours from Atlanta. At Christmas, Maryellen goes to stay with them. The little pond nearby is frozen over, and she gets to realize her dream of ice-skating on it. The Larkins also visit Grandmom and Grandpop at Thanksgiving in Maryellen's time-travel story, *The Sky's the Limit: My Journey with Maryellen*.

Road Trips

Recreational car trips became very popular in the 1950s, and when Dad brings home an Airstream Trailer, the Larkin family hits the road for the summer, driving north and west, staying at campgrounds, stopping at roadside attractions, and visiting Yellowstone, the Alamo, and other western parks. As they drive, Maryellen loves watching for the funny, rhyming Burma Shave signs along the road! (Taking Off, A Maryellen Classic, Volume 2 and *The Sky's the Limit: My Journey with Maryellen*)