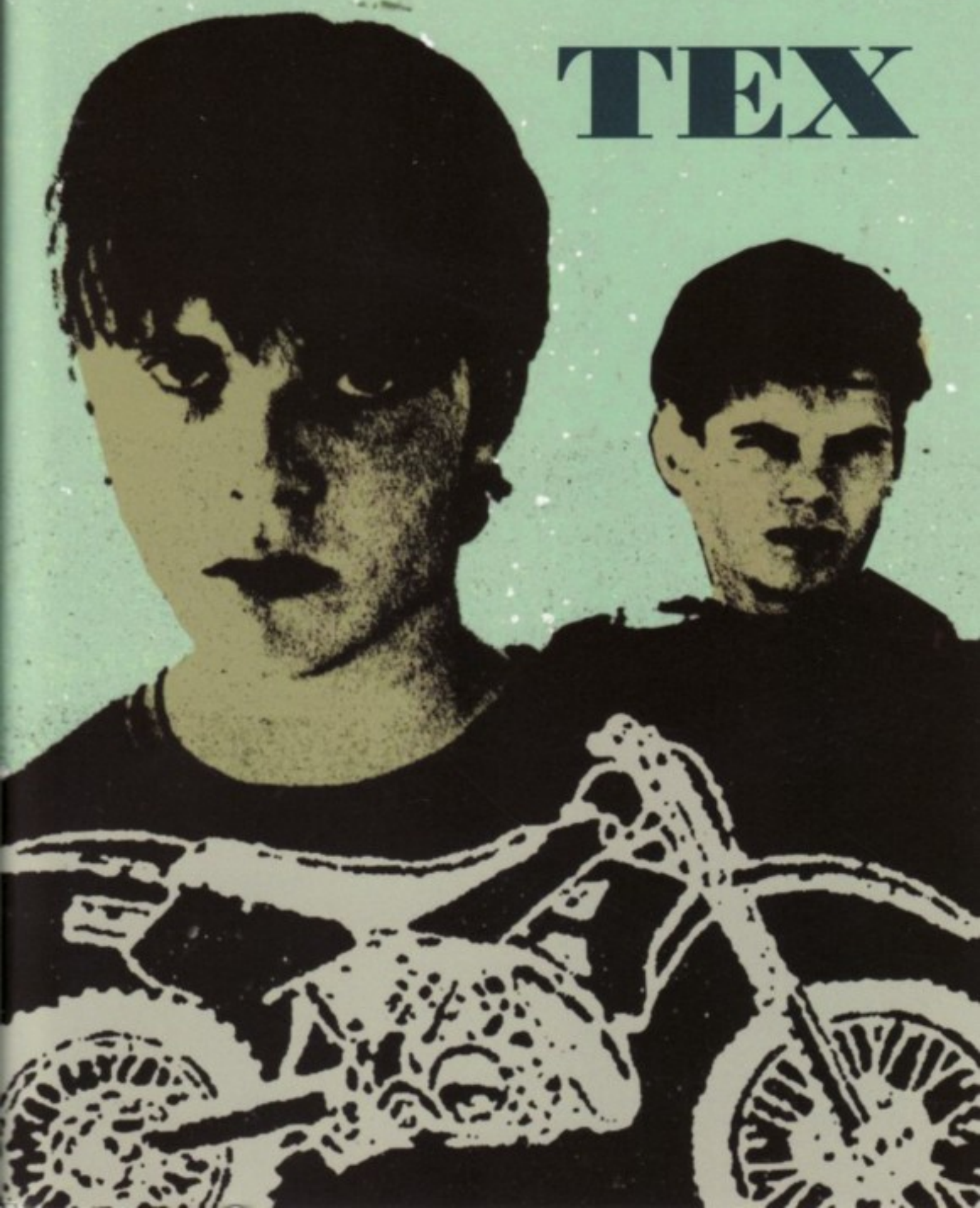


S. E. HINTON

Author of The Outsiders

TEX



ONE



"There ain't no bear in that bush," I said. Negrito's ears were pricked so far forward they almost touched, and he was picking up his feet like he was walking on eggshells.

"You've never even seen a bear, you dumb horse," I told him, keeping a strong leg on him. "You don't even know what one looks like."

Negrito blew through his nose, rolling one eye toward the bush.

I laughed. Negrito had a good imagination.

A sudden gust of wind rustled the bush and Negrito gave a snort and a huge sideways leap and tried to take off. I kept him back long enough to let him know it was my idea to gallop, then we went. The drumming of his hooves was better than music.

"There's a ditch coming up, man," I said. I

could tell by the way he was holding his head up that he saw it.

"Do you want to jump it or not?"

I felt him weave a little, so I leaned back and pushed, tightening my leg. "Sure you do."

We soared over the ditch without breaking stride, but once we landed, he bobbed his head and bucked a little.

"Boy, that was fun! You're a great jumper. A really great jumper," I said, slapping his neck with the reins. "Next year we make the Olympics."

Then, worried that I sounded too sarcastic, I added, "For a cow horse you are a really good jumper."

We loped on. This was the first day I could really feel fall coming on, not so much because it was chilly, but there was a slant to the sunlight and a smell in the air that meant fall.

Pop ought to be coming home pretty soon. Summer, shoot, there were lots of rodeos going on, lots of places he could be all summer, but fall would be a really good time for him to come home.

Negrito jumped sideways and started bucking again.

"Geez, it's a rabbit. For Pete's sake, don't you know a rabbit when you see one?"

Negrito shook his head. I got him collected till he was bunched up like a coiled spring and his canter felt like a rocking chair.

He was just playing around. He was a pretty brave horse, actually. Fall always made him

feel good. Besides that I hadn't ridden him for a while. My best friend, Johnny Collins, got a motorcycle for his birthday a month ago, and I'd been spending a lot of time dirt-biking with him.

I slowed Negrito down to a walk to cool him off. I had to get back and change clothes before I went to school, and I couldn't leave him hot. He kept breaking into a jog trot. Fall mornings he could go forever.

"I've been wasting a lot of time with that cycle," I said, while I was unsaddling him. "But it was new and everything and Johnny kept pestering me to go with him, but we'll go out for rides more."

Negrito turned and nipped at me. Sometimes he meant it, but mostly he'd just catch my sleeve or my jacket. I slipped the bridle over his ears. He almost knocked me down trying to scratch his head on my arm. The bit always made his mouth itch.

"Seeya later." I swung over the fence. Negrito stood there, waiting.

"Okay." I pulled the last piece of carrot out of my pocket and gave it to him. Then I just walked off because I never could convince him that I didn't have any more carrots.

Across the paddock my brother Mason's horse, Red, stood swishing flies, looking bored out of his mind. Mason had never treated him like a person, so Red had never acted like one. Mason was a pretty good rider, though. Not as good as me. Even Pop admitted that. A couple

Easygoing and reckless Tex likes everyone and everything, especially his horse, Negrito, and Johnny Collins's blue-eyed sister, Jamie. Life with his older brother, Mason, would be just about perfect if only Mace would stop complaining about Pop, who hasn't been home in five months. While Mason worries about paying the bills and getting a basketball scholarship—his ticket out of Oklahoma—Tex just seems to attract trouble. Can he find a way to keep things together when everything seems to be falling apart?

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