

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Out of the Dust

by
Karen Hesse

Book Information

Karen Hesse, Out of the Dust
Quiz Number: 18783
Scholastic, Inc, 1997
ISBN 0-590-36080-9; LCCN
227 Pages
Book Level: 5.3
Interest Level: MG

In a series of poems, fourteen-year-old Billie Jo relates the hardships of living on her family's wheat farm.

Award: ABC (Assoc. of Booksellers for Children) Choice Aw; ALA Notable/Best Books; Jefferson Cup Award/Honor; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Newbery Medal; Scott O'Dell Award; SLJ Best Book; State Award; YALSA Top Ten

Topics: Disasters, Droughts; Places, Farms; Poetry/Rhymes, Poetry/Rhymes; Power Lessons AR, Grade 5; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Respect All Voices: Respect; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Recommended Reading, Children's Literature Choice; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice; U.S. States/Regions, Oklahoma

Main Characters

Arley Wanderdale the man who teaches music at the school, plays music at a local theater, and considers Billie Jo, who plays piano, one of his star pupils

Bayard Kelby Billie Jo's father, a farmer straight to his soul, who continues to believe in his land even through the years of dust, but whose faith and hope are shattered by the death of his wife

Billie Jo Kelby the fourteen-year-old girl who writes this journal of her life in the form of chronological poems, and lives in Oklahoma during the Depression and Dust Bowl in the 1930s

Louise the lady who becomes "the other woman," with whom Bayard has fallen in love in the book's closing poems, a teacher of adults at night school, and a woman who knows how to "not step on the toes of a ghost"

Mad Dog Craddock Billie Jo's friend and rival, who has a wonderful singing voice and is the brightest of Arley's young musical "stars"

Polly Kelby Billie Jo's mother, who dies in the course of the journal after a terrible accident

Vocabulary

depression economic bad times, when jobs are scarce and businesses reduce their activity; the "Great Depression" that began with the stock market crash of 1929 and continued until World War II

diversification in farming, the practice of planting different types of crops to take advantage of different crop prices and to vary the nutrients taken from the soil

migrants people who move, especially to seek work in different places

mortgage debt or agreement between a bank and a property owner, by which the "owner" has use of the house or land so long as payments to the bank continue to be made

Synopsis

This fictional diary begins in 1934, as the Great Depression and prolonged drought have brought hard times to Billie Jo Kelby's Oklahoma. The family's farm is suffering from the choking dust that kills the wheat and invades homes and even their souls. However, the Kelbys still have hopes. Ma is with child, Daddy undaunted, and Billie Jo "comes ripe" when the summer wheat does, a fourteen-year-old awakening to herself. By constructing the novel in the form of chronological poems, Hesse provides an unusually vivid portrait of Billie Jo's world and mind.

Billie Jo is both a fine student and a passionate musician. Her poems prove her to be similarly both an acute observer and a melodious improviser. She

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draws her passion for piano from her mother. While Ma taught Billie Jo to play, their approaches to music differ. Ma plays well, but formally, while Billie Jo's approach aligns with the intuitive nature of jazz. Their relationship bears the same divergence, with Ma a loving, but strict and demanding figure whom Billie Jo wishes would be more demonstrative and appreciative. While her eye can be critical, Billie Jo's sensibility is also wide open. Among the early poems, she sketches the dust, the harvest, and the faces of neighbors facing a grimness of enormous and enveloping proportions.

Her poise between an obviously strong family life and the hard times engulfing them is shattered by a terrible accident. Billie Jo's hands are burned when a pot of kerosene catches fire. Far worse, as she moves to heave the burning pot out the door, Billie Jo splatters her own mother in flames. Ma dies shortly afterward during childbirth. A boy is born, then he, too, dies. Both Billie Jo and her father require a long grieving and healing. More than her father, Billie Jo is aware of how little help they give each other. She tries at first to continue playing piano, but the pain because of her injured hands is too great. The dust storms grow worse, the times get harder, and her father seems unable to do anything more than dig a hole, literally, for the pond his wife had wanted. The silence between them becomes so unbearable, Billie Jo decides to run away. She hops a train and heads west, the direction of hope for so many of her neighbors. She meets a hobo who is fleeing from the family he can no longer feed, and their encounter changes her mind. She comes to realize she cannot get "out of the dust" because the dust of home is a truth inside her.

Her return to her father begins the process of forgiveness and moving beyond their griefs. When she learns of "the other woman" to whom her father turned during her aborted escape, Billie Jo allows Louise to enter their lives. Together, they break her father's silence and start to hope again. Her father buys a mule to take the place of his broken tractor, and Billie Jo returns to her mother's piano, ready at last to play again. Billie Jo's unprecocious directness

and emotional honesty strike poem after poem. While their form is confessional, their sweep is historical. Glimpse by glimpse, they build a mural of their grim time. Even more remarkable, one could take any poem from the book and turn it like a prism to the light. They form as fine an introduction to poetry itself as a young reader is likely to have.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Literary Analysis

Why might the author have chosen to write this book as a diary made of poems?

Billie Jo is a creative person. We know that from how she loves and plays piano. Poetry lets her write in the same way she thinks and plays music, focusing on emotion and the sounds of her words. The poetry also contrasts with the grim historical time. The Dust Bowl and the Great Depression are not usually thought of as "creative times." By meeting Billie Jo in her poems, the reader sees how strong and imaginative her spirit is, even though she lives through a drought that is driving the life out of Oklahoma. In a certain way, her poems convince us that even the terrible times that she experiences are beautiful.

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Constructing Meaning

Billie Jo often thinks of herself as her "father's daughter," rather than her mother's. But perhaps she doesn't notice many ways she resembles her mother instead. What are some ways she is more like Ma?

Music obviously connects them. Playing piano, which is so important to Billie Jo, is a gift she received from her mother, even though their ways of playing are different. Billie Jo also values school. She wishes her mother praised her more for her good work, but Ma makes sure her daughter takes school very seriously. Daddy's lack of interest in her schooling after Ma's death seems more than a question of grief. Charity also connects Ma and Billie Jo--they both donate Franklin's nighties to people in need. Perhaps speech is the most important connection. Although they argue and have their closets of silence from one another, after Ma dies, Billie Jo notices many things to tell or ask her, which her father will not listen to or know. When she asks him Mad Dog's real name, for example, "He looks at me like I'm talking another language." And the poem ends, "Ma could have told me." When she returns from running away, Billie Jo's way of loving begins to seem as stubborn as Ma's.

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Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features With or without devoting discussion time to the topic of poetry, you can involve students in the process of writing poetry by using the book as a prompt. Students might be asked to keep their own "verse diary." They could pick a poem in the book with a mood, topic, or image they find striking and write a poem from their own experiences that shares the mood, starts with the same topic, or uses the image in their own way. Sometimes the cue of taking a phrase they liked as a title is enough to inspire a poem. An especially apt assignment might be: "Write a poem in the voice of a character who lived long ago."

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Franklin Roosevelt's image is lifted high throughout the book. He is viewed as a hero, or perhaps a

guardian angel, by the Kelbys and many neighbors among them in the rural Oklahoma of the 1930s. Students for whom this book is a first glance at Roosevelt as a president would benefit from a discussion, further reading, or research projects that fill in the book's historical ellipses.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors If teaching the book at the middle school/junior high level, you could expose students to other works about the Dust Bowl and its victims. John Ford's version of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* remains a succinct and engaging film about the politics and poverty of Oklahomans who migrated west, like so many of Billie Jo's neighbors. Woody Guthrie's music would provide another opportunity to explore the mind and manners of migrants at that time. Just hearing the anger in "This Land is Your Land" would amplify the novel.

Understanding the Author's Craft Hesse's book offers you many ways to broach the topic of poetry to your class. The first step might be to engage students in a discussion of the book's own poetry. Even without providing technical terms, the discussion could highlight how moods, shapes, and topics differ among the poems. Which poems struck students as memorable? How different would the book have been if Billie Jo wrote in paragraphs instead of poems? Such personal insights could then lead to some more formal presentation of "real" poets. You may wish to cover elements of prosody, perhaps comparing the poems of a traditionalist like Robert Frost with Billie Jo's free verse. And Walt Whitman, of course, is always ripe for any introduction to free verse.