

Out of the Dust

Discussion Guide

BOOK SUMMARY

*Daddy came in,
he sat across from Ma and blew his nose.
Mud streamed out.
He coughed and spit out mud.
If he had cried,
his tears would have been mud too,
but he didn't cry.
And neither did Ma.*

In this powerful historical novel, a young teenager named Billie Jo Kelby describes her life from the winter of 1934 through the autumn of 1935. Through her story readers see what life in the dust bowl was like as Oklahoma farmers struggled to raise crops choked by continual dust storms, and families struggled to survive.

Billie Jo and her parents face these hard times together and, despite the never-ending dust, Billie Jo is happy. More than anything, Billie Jo loves to play the piano, and she has begun earning money performing. Ma and Pa are happy, too — soon Ma will give birth and at last Billie Jo will have a brother or sister.

Then a terrible accident changes everything. Ma mistakes a pail of kerosene that Pa had left next to the stove for water and begins to use it to cook. Fire erupts. After her mother runs outside, Billie Jo tosses the flaming kerosene out the door, realizing too late that Ma is standing right in the path of the fiery liquid. Billie Jo tries desperately to save Ma, beating out the flames with her

own hands. Ma and the baby both die, the town gossips that Billie Jo caused the accident, Pa withdraws into a deep depression, and Billie Jo's hands are so badly burned that she cannot play the piano and daily chores are agony.

For a long time, she can forgive neither her father nor herself, and even escapes on a freight train. As she leaves the dust of Oklahoma behind, Billie Jo comes to understand herself and her father in a new way. She returns home; the many hardships she has faced — her mother's tragic death, her father's retreat into depression, her own need to escape, and the personal journey that finally result in healing and forgiveness — all lead Billie Jo "out of the dust" in a most surprising way.

Awards for *Out of the Dust*:

- 1998 Newbery Medal Winner
- Winner of the 1998 Scott O'Dell Award
- An ALA Notable Children's Book
- An ALA Best Book for Young Adults

AUTHOR INFORMATION

"While growing up in Baltimore, Maryland, I dreamed of becoming many things: an archaeologist, an ambassador, an actor, an author. In 1969, I attended Towson State College as a theater major, but transferred after two semesters to the University of Maryland, where I eventually earned a B.A. in English with double minors in Psychology and Anthropology.

I have earned wages as a waitress, a nanny, a librarian, a personnel officer, an agricultural laborer, an advertising secretary, a typesetter, a proofreader, a mental health care provider, a substitute teacher, and a book reviewer. In and around the edges of all those jobs I have written poems, stories, and books, books, books. The seed for *Out of the Dust* grew out of a picture book idea. Presented with an early draft of my picture book, *Come On, Rain* (Scholastic Press), my writing group insisted I elaborate on why my characters wanted rain so badly. I began researching times when people desperately wanted rain, and *Out of the Dust* blossomed into existence.

I love writing. I can't wait to get to my keyboard every morning. I also love reading, hiking, spending time with friends and family, traveling, and music — both playing it and listening to it."

Karen Hesse lives in Vermont with her husband and two teenage daughters.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

UNDERSTANDING TIME AND PLACE

Out of the Dust is an unflinching portrait of life in a time and place in which people faced terrible hardships. The dust storms and the economic disaster that the characters face are very real. Have students share what they already know about the Depression and the Dust Bowl. If needed supply some basic facts, including the information that by the 1930s the soil in Oklahoma and neighboring states had become loose and dry partly as the result of converting too much wild grassland to farmland. Wheat crops failed, and nearly fifty million acres were severely damaged before conservation measures helped put an end to the storms that threatened the lives of people and animals as well as the crops. Have students brainstorm what it might have been like to live during that time. How would everyday life be affected?

DISCUSSING THE BOOK

ANALYZING PLOT AND CHARACTER

Early Influences:

Two women who are important to Billie Jo are her mother and her teacher, Miss Freeland. Describe these characters. What are some of the important things Billie Jo learns from them?

A Defining Incident

Sometimes, one event can help readers learn a great deal about the characters in the book. After meeting the man in the boxcar, Billie Jo turns around and returns home. What was this man like? How did meeting him affect Billie Jo? In what ways is Billie Jo's father different from this man?

Change

In one year, Billie Jo grows and changes a great deal. Have students review each of the seven main sections of the book. What are Billie Jo's main concerns in each section? How is Billie Jo the same in each section? How does she change? If Billie Jo were to describe herself in 1936, how might her life be different? How would it most likely be the same?

Acts of Courage

Billie Jo and others face many grave difficulties in this story. In your opinion, which character in this story showed the greatest courage? What did he or she do?

THE AUTHOR'S CRAFT

Free Verse

The author made an unusual choice when she elected to write this novel as a series of short poems told from the point of view of the main character. In what ways does this format help readers get into the story and understand the main character?

Historical Fiction

The author did a great deal of research on life in the Dust Bowl to help her create authentic setting, events, and characters. Skim through the book for details that seem to reflect facts. What are the most interesting facts you learned about the setting, everyday life in the 1930s?

Theme

Forgiveness. What does it take to be able to forgive? Karen Hesse has said that every relationship in the book — not only the relationships between the people, but also the relationships between the people and the land — is about forgiveness. How does Billie Jo show that she has forgiven her father and herself? How does her father show that he has forgiven her, himself, and the land? How does the author suggest that in some ways the land has also forgiven the people for this misuse?

Title

Karen Hesse is an author who chooses every word with care. The phrase "out of the dust" appears several times in the book. At one point Billie Jo wants to escape "out of the dust," but later she says "I can't get out of something that is inside me." How does the title of the book reflect on Billie Jo as a person? How does it reflect on the general experience of people at that time?

WRITING PROMPTS

Poetic Portrait

Have students reread the poem "Beginning: 1920," the first entry of the book, and suggest that students use it as a model to create a portrait of themselves or another person. The portrait can describe such things as how or where the person was born, what they look like, and what they like to do. Note the way Karen Hesse uses similes, comparisons with like or as (e.g. "cheekbones like bicycle handles," "mean as a rattler") in her poem. Encourage students to try to use their own similes in the poems they write. The completed portraits may be illustrated with photos and compiled into a class book or displayed on a bulletin board.

Newspaper Article

To help her learn about the daily life in the Dust Bowl in the 1930's, Karen Hesse spent months reading articles from a newspaper that was published in the Oklahoma Panhandle during that period. She has said that many of the incidents in the book, especially those related to talent shows, dances, and daily acts of kindness and generosity, are based on events reported in that paper. Invite students to select an event from *Out of the Dust* and retell it in the form of a newspaper article. Before writing, students can examine articles from a local paper for style and structure. Remind students that newspaper articles are concise and answer the questions Who, What, When, Where, and Why.

Essay

Despite the terrible hardships they faced, Billie Jo, her family and neighbors still found ways to help others who were in need. Ask students to recall these acts of generosity. Which stands out in their minds as the most generous?

Why? You may wish to have students create a chart to help them organize their thoughts and recall details to support their opinion before they write. In one column they can describe what help was given; in a second column they can list the reasons that the person who received help needed aid and what might have happened if he or she had not received the help; in a third column they can record information about the person(s) who provided the help, what they gave up, and how they felt after their generous act.

ACTIVITIES ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

LANGUAGE ARTS

Dramatic Reading

The form of the novel — a series of first person, free verse poems — is unusual. Discuss how this form adds to the atmosphere of the book and the reader's understanding of Billie Jo, the narrator. Read aloud the short poem "Breaking Drought" (February, 1934), inviting students to note how the author uses repetition, line breaks, and punctuation to create a rhythm and mood for the poem. Notice especially how the last three lines of the poem are very short and seem to die away, like the few drops of rain that soon disappear. Have students work independently or in small groups to select another poem from the book to read aloud for the class.

Dialogue

The entire story is told from Billie Jo's point of view. What might Billie Jo's father say about the accident if he spoke for himself? Have pairs of students work together to create and act out a dialogue between Billie Jo and her father. First have students write a short scene which takes place shortly after the accident, then have them write another scene that tells how each character feels about the accident toward the end of the book. Invite students to perform their dialogues for the class and have other students comment on the main differences between the two scenes.

Poster

The talent show and the president's ball were events that Billie Jo and her whole community enjoyed. Ask students to skim through the book for

descriptions of these events and then select one and create a poster to advertise it. After the posters are complete, students can present them to the class, explaining why they chose the wording and art they used.

SOCIAL STUDIES

Timeline

In addition to dealing with the Dust Bowl, Billie Jo's father also faced hardships when he served as a soldier in World War I. Have students research important events that span the years 1917 through 1935. Then ask students to select ten key events and create a timeline to present them in chronological order.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Depression

Throughout the book, Billie Jo makes it clear that President Roosevelt is someone she considers a hero. Have students read about Roosevelt, emphasizing the things he did before he became President and during his first term. Ask students to use the facts they find to write a short essay describing Roosevelt and telling what they think was his greatest accomplishment during that time.

GEOGRAPHY

Have students use an encyclopedia and maps to find answers to the following questions about the Dust Bowl: Which states were affected? How far did the dust storms travel? In which years did the worst storms occur? Have there been other, more recent dust storms? You may wish to have students use what they discover to create a fact sheet on the Dust Bowl that can be given to other students before they read *Out of the Dust*.

SCIENCE AND MATH

Ecological Chain Reaction

Entwined with the human stories told in the book, *Out of the Dust* also tells the all too real story of the sequence of events that led to the erosion of the soil, affecting the water cycle and creating dust storms and ecological disaster. Review with students that when the wild grassland or sod was plowed up for

farming wheat, the soil became more exposed and vulnerable to erosion, could not hold water as well, and lost important minerals. For an introduction to understanding the Dust Bowl, read the poem "The Path of Our Sorrow" (September 1934). Have groups work together, using facts from the book and additional resources, to create a diagram that shows the chain of events that led to the dust storms, and measures that helped the storms end. Have students present their findings and discuss what lessons we can learn from the Dust Bowl.

Radio

Mad Dog sings on the radio. By 1934, the radio was a popular fixture in many homes. Invite students to research the development of this invention and its uses and to write a paragraph to summarize what they find out.

Money

Billie Jo's mother gives her fifty cents to buy ingredients for a birthday cake, and she returns home with too much change. As she walks back to the store she thinks about the sheet music she could buy if the extra pennies were hers to spend. Have students visit a local store to research how much money they would have to spend today to bake a birthday cake. If you have access to newspapers or magazines from the 1930's via the internet or microfiche, have students search for old ads that will give them more information about what things cost in 1934 and how the cost of things has changed. Discuss the reasons prices have changed over the years.

THE ARTS

Music

Billie Jo loves the piano, and she mentions some of the popular songs she plays. Invite students to research the popular music and musicians of the era. If possible, have students bring in tapes or CDs and listen to the music. Students who are able to read music and play an instrument can be encouraged to learn some pieces and perform them.

Art

Each poem in the book creates a strong mood and is rich in visual images. Ask students to select a favorite poem and create a drawing, painting or collage that reflects the mood and images that the poem suggests.

Film

Bring in the classic film *The Grapes of Wrath* or another film that reflects the life of people during the 1930's. Have students create a chart to compare the characters in the film with the characters in *Out of the Dust*. How are they alike? How are they different?

OTHER BOOKS BY KAREN HESSE

The Music of Dolphins

Rescued after living with dolphins as a wild child, sixteen-year-old Mila learns human language and faces a choice between two different worlds. ((star)) "A song of beauty and sorrow, haunting and unforgettable." — School Library Journal, starred review

An ALA Best Book for Young Adults

Grades 3–5

Just Juice

with pictures by Robert Andrew Parker

Third-grader Juice Faulstich lives with her family in the North Carolina Hills. She can't seem to learn to read — but she has other talents that help pull her family through some hard times.

Grades 3–5

Come On, Rain

illustrated by Jon J Muth

Exquisite language and acute observation depict the glorious experience of a refreshing and long-awaited summer rain.

Grades K–2

Discussion guide written by Kylene Beers and Teri Lesesne, teachers of children's and young adult literature at Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas, and by Adrienne Betz.