



Out of the Dust

by Karen Hesse

Teacher's Guide

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Synopsis

Winter 1934

The narrator recounts the story of her birth, right on the boards of their cabin. She was named Billie Jo because her father wanted a boy. Instead, he got a redheaded, freckle-faced girl with a hunger to play the piano. An only child, Billie Jo lives with her parents on the Oklahoma Panhandle. She recounts some of her early memories, such as the rabbit hunt, the time her best friend Livie moved to California, and playing the piano with Arley Wanderdale at the Palace Theatre. Billie Jo is a brilliant student and musician, but her mother seems to resent her daughter's accomplishments. Her mother's resentment increases when she gets pregnant and the drought gets worse. The crops fail; people are desperate.

Spring 1934

Adding to their misery, the banks have failed and the country is in a worldwide Depression. Resentment builds when Ma wants Pa to plant something other than wheat but he refuses to change. He also refuses to dig a pond that she wants. Rain offers no relief, for it just washes away all the seed. Billie Jo spends the summer playing the piano on the road with Arley Wanderdale and the Black Mesa Boys. Mama only agrees because they need the money.

Summer 1934

The Dionne quintts are born, and Mama weeps to think of it. A sixteen-year old boy comes asking for food in exchange for work. Although Billie Jo's family has precious little of either, they treat the boy with great kindness and think how his family must be missing him. Thousands of young men are heading west, trying to start a new life away from the dust storms and shattered farm families.

Billie Jo and her mother are badly burned in a kerosene fire. Billie Jo's hands are destroyed; her mother dies. The baby, a boy, is born, but dies soon after. Pa drinks up all the money Ma had saved. Grasshoppers destroy what is left of the crops, including Ma's beloved apple trees.

The family shattered, Billie Jo spends all her days in pain while her father digs a huge hole outside. She thinks he is digging the pond her mother had wanted; the neighbors think he has lost his mind.

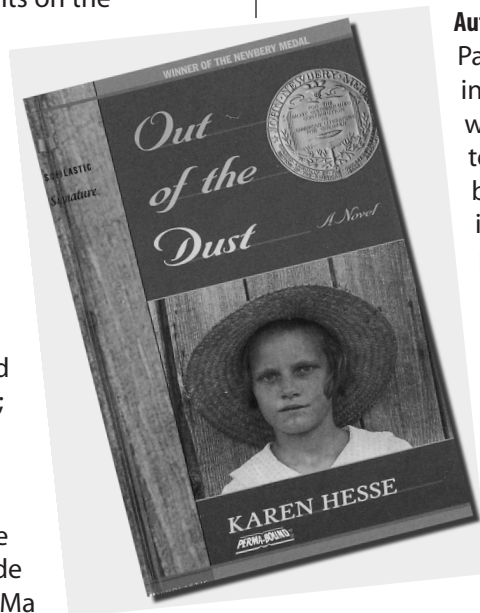
Autumn 1934

Pa gets a job with Wireless Power, excavating for towers. Last year, Coach Albright wanted Billie Jo to be on the basketball team, but this year, because of her burned hands, he doesn't mention playing ball at all. Arley wants Billie Jo to try playing the piano again. She does, but plays very badly because of the pain in her hands.

Winter 1935

Again, Billie Jo tests at the top of her grade and misses not being able to tell her mother. Billie Jo has a sad and lonely Christmas dinner with her father. Meanwhile, the farmers shoot their livestock because the animals are starving to death. It finally rains, and Billie Jo cleans the mud off everything, even though her hands ache terribly. The government sends food and neighbors lucky enough to have cows send milk. For the first time in a long while, the children have full stomachs. A migrant family moves into the school and the children carefully make food for them. The family studies along with the children. One day, the migrant woman gives birth to a perfect little girl. She dresses the child in the feedsack outfit Mama had made for Franklin, her baby who died even before he could be named. In February, the family leaves.

Sheriff Robertson confiscates a still and gives the sugar to the teacher to use for the students. They are thrilled to have some dessert to wash down all the dust. Billie Jo wins third prize at the talent contest at the Palace;



her hands hurt so much cannot even hold the dollar prize and ribbon. Soon after, Billie Jo gets caught in a brutal dust storm. Pa goes out after her. They both make it home safely, but they are torn and covered in dust.

Spring 1935

Pa has skin cancer, but ignores it. Aunt Ellis invites Billie Jo to come live with her in Lubbock, Texas. Billie Jo is very restless but doesn't go, Pa says, "Let's wait and see." All around, people are leaving the dust-ravaged land. On the way to a funeral, the entire procession gets caught in a dust storm. Back home, the house and barn are covered in dunes of dust and the machinery won't work. Mad Dog, the young man Billie Jo likes, goes to Amarillo to try to sing on the radio. Billie Jo is invited to play the piano at graduation, but she cannot. In May, Mad Dog sings on the radio.

Summer 1935

Billie Jo is determined to leave. She takes all the dimes that her mother had saved for her and hops a railroad car west. She gets off the railroad in Flagstaff, Arizona, and calls her father to say she is coming home. They talk deeply for the first time, and she is able to forgive him for leaving the bucket of kerosene by the fire. She is able to forgive herself for all the rest.

Autumn 1935

Pa goes to the doctor and has his cancer removed. The doctor tells Billie Jo to use her hands to help them heal. Pa takes up with a woman named Louise, his teacher at night school, whom Billie likes because she is plain and honest. She and Louise grow closer. The wheat grows and hope returns to the farm. Pa proposes to Louise and she accepts; Billie Jo resumes playing the piano.

Background on the Dust Bowl

Life had never been easy for the people who lived in Oklahoma, but in the 1930s it was especially hard for the farmers on the Panhandle, a barren stretch of rock and red soil wedged between Texas, Kansas, and New Mexico. There was no irrigation system, no reservoirs, no canals to bring water to their farms. When there was sufficient rain, the Panhandle farmers were able to grow wheat and corn and raise livestock. When there wasn't enough rain, they were forced to borrow and beg to survive.

In 1931, it stopped raining in the Oklahoma Panhandle. Crops withered and died. Already suffering from the

effects of the Great Depression (which had started in 1929 when the stock market failed), most farmers were deeply in debt. By 1932, a thousand farms a week in Oklahoma, Texas, and Arkansas were being foreclosed. By 1936, there had been five straight years of drought. Just when it seemed that life couldn't get any worse, it did.

The wind started to blow and blow and blow, sending clouds of bitter red dust into every corner of houses and barns. Chickens, pigs, and even cows were buried in drifts of dust. The wind howled for four interminable years, making the sky pitch black even at noon. Often exceeding fifty miles an hour, the wind carried away the topsoil and left a base of solid red clay, making farming impossible. The region became known as the great Dust Bowl.

By the end of the 1930s, nearly half the Oklahoma farmers were bankrupt, their farms lost. They were broke, hungry, and desperate.

Author Sketch

Karen Hesse was born in 1952, in Baltimore, MD. Hesse has worked as a teacher, librarian, advertising secretary, typesetter, and proofreader as well as a writer. She and her husband Randy have two daughters, Kate and Rachel. She currently lives in Williamsville, Vermont.



As a child, Hesse believes she was "thin and pasty, I looked like I'd drifted in from another world and never quite belonged in this one," she noted. A sickly child, she could often only be soothed by a ride in the family car. Years later, Hesse often climbed an apple tree. "There, cradled in the boughs of the tree, I spent hours reading," she said. "Often my bony bottom would go numb, but I loved it up there so much, I ignored the discomfort."

Hesse's father was a collection man, and sometimes Hesse joined him on his rounds, an experience that taught her a degree of sympathy for people who were less well off than she was. Her parents divorced, and Hesse's mother remarried. Although Hesse grew fond of her stepfather and stepsister, her grades were not good in the first two years of high school. Her drama teacher helped her gain admission to Towson State College but when Hesse was nineteen, she married and left college.

Shortly thereafter, Hesse's husband shipped out with the Navy for Vietnam. While her husband was overseas, Hesse finished her BA at the University of Maryland. She started writing and sharing her work aloud, becoming known as a poet. After Hesse's husband returned from Vietnam, the couple moved to Vermont, where she gave birth to their daughters. In 1991, Hesse published her first children's book, *Wish on a Unicorn*. Her career was launched. A dedicated professional, Hesse sticks to a writing routine as much as possible. Up at 5:00 A.M. seven days a week, she drives to her studio and begins work.

A car trip to Colorado in 1993 sparked the idea for *Out of the Dust*, but it took her several years to complete the novel. Much of that time was spent doing research, reading newspapers of the time, and getting the feel of the life in the Oklahoma panhandle in the 1930s. "I never attempted to write this book any other way than in free verse," she noted in her Newbery acceptance speech. "The frugality of the life, the hypnotically hard work of farming, the grimness of conditions during the dust bowl demanded an economy of words."

"I love writing," Hesse explained in a recent interview. "I can't wait to get to my desk every morning. I wish everyone felt that way about their chosen profession...The thing about writing ... until your words become a book you can change them, mold them, shape and reshape them until they look and sound and feel precisely the way you want."

Bibliography

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Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, October, 1992, p. 44; November, 1993, p. 84; May, 1994, p. 289; June, 1994, pp. 321-322; January, 1996, p. 161.
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Five Owls, May-June, 1996, pp. 116-117; January- February, 1998, pp. 60-61.
Horn Book, July-August, 1991, pp. 457-458; September-October, 1992, p. 585; March- April, 1994, pp. 190-191; July- August, 1994, p. 452; September-October,

- 1994, p. 599; September-October, 1995, p. 634; January-February, 1998, p. 73; July-August, 1998, pp. 422-427, 428-432.
Kirkus Reviews, March 1, 1991, p. 318; February 15, 1993, p. 227; April 1, 1994, p. 480; August 15, 1996, p. 1235.
New York Times, January 13, 1998, p. B3.
New York Times Book Review, June 19, 1994, p. 28.
Publishers Weekly, June 29, 1992, p. 64; August 30, 1993, p. 95; October 25, 1993, p. 59; October 23, 1995, p. 70; September 2, 1996, p. 131; August 25, 1997, pp. 72-73; November 3, 1997, p. 50; September 21, 1998, p. 85.
School Library Journal, August 1992, pp. 154-155; July 1993, p. 61; October 1993, p. 100; December 1993, p. 89; May 1994, p. 114; June 1994, p. 148; December 1995, p. 131; November 1996, pp. 120, 123; September 1997, pp. 131, 217; February 1998, p. 13; May 1998, p. 26.
Something about the Author Autobiography Series, Volume 25, Volume 74, Gale 1998.
St. James Guide to Young Adult Writers. Second edition. Edited by Tom and Sara Pendergast. Detroit: St. James Press, 1999. Earlier editions published as "Twentieth-Century Young Adult Writers."
Voice of Youth Advocates, August 1994, p. 146; February 1997, p. 328; April 1998, p. 46.

Critic's Corner

Out of the Dust won the top award in the field of young adult literature -- the Newbery Medal-- as well as the American Library Association Award and Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction. Not surprisingly, critics were lavish in their praise for the novel.

For example, *Booklist* critic Susan Dove Lempke commented that even though the story was bleak, "Hesse's writing transcends the gloom and transforms it into a powerfully compelling tale of a girl with enormous strength, courage, and love." Sarah K. Hetz noted in *Voice of Youth Advocates* that this "novel celebrates the tenacity of the human spirit." Peter D. Sieruta noted in *Horn Book* that Billie Jo's voice, "nearly every word informed by longing, provides an immediacy that expressively depicts both a grim historical era and one family's healing." Writing in *Five Owls*, critic Thomas S. Owens felt that Hesse's novel was more than "vivid storytelling," and that it "gives a face to history." Owens went on to conclude that "*Out of the Dust* seems destined to become [Hesse's] signature work, a literary groundbreaker as stunning as Oklahoma's dust bowl recovery."

Other Works by the Author

Wish on a Unicorn, 1991
Letters from Rifka, 1992
Poppy's Chair, 1993
Lester's Dog, 1993
Lavender, 1993
Sable, 1994
Phoenix Rising, 1994
A Time of Angels, 1995
The Music of Dolphins, 1996
Just Juice, 1998
Come On, Rain!, 1999
Light in the Storm: The Civil War Diary of Amelia Martin, Fenwick Island, Delaware, 1861; 1999
Stowaway, 2000
Witness, 2001
Aleutian Sparrow, 2003
Stone Lamp: A Hanukkah Collection: Eight Days of Dark, Eight Nights of Light, 2003
Cats in Krasinski Square, 2004
Young Hans Christian Andersen, 2005

The Importance of Setting

Readers may have to infer the characterization of the setting from details in the story, however, in *Out of the Dust* Hesse directly refers to the Oklahoma Panhandle of the 1930s. The setting is tremendously important to the novel, functioning almost as a character. Everything the characters do is influenced by the weather and its effects on the land. It determines if the characters stay on their land or move--in some cases, even if they live or die.

General Objectives

1. To appreciate the author's use of free verse
2. To understand the novel's title
3. To recognize the importance of setting
4. To assess each character's personality
5. To recognize the novel's theme
6. To appreciate the difficulties people in the Oklahoma panhandle experienced in the 1930s
7. To explore the ways kindness can be shown
8. To find examples of bravery and courage
9. To sympathize with the main character's plight
10. To describe the novel's mood or atmosphere

Specific Objectives

1. To analyze the importance of music in Billie Jo's life
2. To see how Billie Jo deals with her mother's death
3. To understand how Billie Jo is injured and her reaction to her injuries
4. To probe Billie Jo's guilt and bitterness over the accident
5. To probe the relationship between Billie Jo and her father Bayard
6. To see the effect of setting on a person's life
7. To understand the plot structure
8. To grasp the extent of the Dust Bowl devastation
9. To understand why the author wrote the novel in poetry rather than prose
10. To visualize the story's action



Literary Terms and Applications

For a better understanding of Karen Hesse's style, present the following terms and applications to the novel:

Free Verse: poetry that does not have regular beat, rhyme, or line length. Walt Whitman's poetry is the best-known example of free verse. Karen Hesse uses free verse in *Out of the Dust* to capture the starkness of the situation. In so doing, she uses the form to echo the content.

Point of View: the position from which a story is told. In *Out of the Dust*, Hesse uses the first-person point of view to give the events a personal and immediate slant. The narrator, Billie Jo Kelby, is one of the characters in the story. The narrator explains the events through her own eyes, using the pronouns I and me.

Cross-Curricular Sources

For more information about the Dust Bowl and the Depression, consult these sources:

Books

- Tricia Andryszewski, *Dust Bowl: Disaster on the Plains*
 Matthew Paul Bonnifield, *Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt and Depression*
 David Booth, *The Dust Bowl*
 James Alfred Davidson, *Patches on My Britches: Memories of Growing Up in the Dust Bowl*
 Mary Knackstedt Dyck, *Waiting on the Bounty: The Dust Bowl Diary of Mary Knackstedt Dyck*
 John Farris, *The Dust Bowl* (World Disasters)
 C. Dean Freudenberger, *Global Dust Bowl: Can We Stop the Destruction of the Land Before It's Too Late?*
 James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California*
 R. Douglas Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History*
 Walta Sorrels Jennings, *Poke Greens For Breakfast?: True Stories of Rural Arkansas, Oklahoma Dust Bowl Days, & South Dakota Sheep Wagon Tales*
 Vance Johnson, *Heaven's Tableland: The Dust Bowl Story*
 David C. King (Editor), *The Dust Bowl* (Perspectives on History Series)
 Patricia Lauber, *Dust Bowl, the Story of Man on the Great Plains*
 Ann Marie Low, *Dust Bowl Diary*
 Milton Meltzer, *Driven from the Land: The Story of the Dust Bowl* (Great Journeys)
 Robert Allen Rutland, *A Boyhood in the Dust Bowl 1926-1934*
 Charles J. Shindo, *Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination* (Rural America)

- Jerry Stanley, *Children of the Dust Bowl: The True Story of the School at Weedpatch Camp*
 Walter J. Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration*
 Lawrence Svobida, *Farming the Dust Bowl*
 Vantassel-Baska, *Dust Bowl: A Problem-Based Unit*
 Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*
 John R. Wunder (Editor), *Americans View Their Dust Bowl Experience*

DVDs and Videos

- The American Experience: Surviving the Dust Bowl*
The Grapes of Wrath (1940)

Music

- Woody Guthrie, *Dust Bowl Ballads*
 Peter Rowan, *Dust Bowl Children*
 Nanci Griffith, *The Dust Bowl Symphony*

Internet

- "Great Depression of the 1930's History Guide: The History Beat"
<http://www.search-beat.com/greatdepression.htm>
 "The Great Depression - Documenting America"
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html>
 "Oklahoma (History)"
<http://www.encyclopedia.com/articles/09525.html>
 "Dust Bowl" (Encyclopedia.com)
<http://www.encyclopedia.com/articles/03878.html>
 "Voices from the Dust Bowl"
<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/afctshhtml/tshome.html>
 "The Grapes Of Wrath"
<http://www.filmsite.org/grap.html>

Themes and Motifs

A study of the central issues and situations in Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust* should include these aspects:

Themes

- confusion
- death
- family love
- fear
- hardship
- hunger
- music
- nature
- poetry
- self-realization

Motifs

- being brave in terrifying situations
- dealing with events out of human control
- family love and support
- coping with death and despair
- the importance of sacrifice and selflessness
- random acts of kindness
- music as a means of self-expression
- self-awareness and maturity
- growth and change
- cooperation and helping others

Meaning Study

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have particular meaning in the novel. Explain the meaning of each. Chapter and page numbers indicate the context from which the item is taken.

1. As summer wheat came ripe,/so did I,/born at home, on the kitchen floor... (p. 3)
(From the very first lines, readers are aware that this novel has a very different form than we would find in a conventional story. Although Out of the Dust is a narrative, events are recounted in free-verse poetry rather than in prose. Furthermore, the poetry is as sparse as the lives it describes, stripped down to its bare essentials to tell a gut-wrenching story of tragic hardship redeemed by hope and self-awareness.)
2. When I point my fingers at the keys,/the music/springs straight out of me./Right hand/playing notes sharp as/tongues...(P. 13)
(In this free verse poem entitled "On Stage," Hesse arranges the words and phrases to mimic the arrangement of the white and black keys on a piano. This clever poetic form suggests how important music is to the narrator, Billie Jo. In fact, it is the single thing that sustains her through her early days of hardship.)
3. but sometimes I think she's/just plain jealous/when I'm at the piano/and she's not (p. 28)
(Billie Jo realizes that her mother Polly Kelby was not suited for farm life and had never wished to live this way. Nevertheless, she remade herself into a farm wife to please her husband, whom she loved. But Mrs. Kelby's bitterness remains, especially when Billie Jo plays the piano and Mrs. Kelby must complete her chores rather than playing the music she loves as well. Mrs. Kelby seems equally resentful of her daughter's academic success, another road that has been closed to her since her marriage. Now, Billie Jo is angry at her mother's inability to share in her accomplishments. After her mother's death, however, Billie Jo is willing to settle for even grudging acceptance because she misses her mother so much.)
4. "Daddy!" I called. "You can't stop dust." (p. 32)
(The dust was unstoppable. People slept with wet washcloths or sponges over their faces and stuffed windows and doors with wet towels, but it was impossible to escape the dust. In the morning, everyone's face, mouth, and even tongue would be coated red with dust. Children were assigned the task of cleaning the nostrils of cows two or three times a day. The dust was so thick during some of the dust storms that people who stayed outdoors would be killed. However, more people died of "dust pneumonia" when the dust caused severe damage to their lungs.)
5. Ma/got/burned/bad. (p. 61)
(When Pa placed a pail of kerosene next to the stove, Ma assumed it was a bucket of water and poured it into the coffee. Instantly, it turned into a rope of fire and burned her. She ran outside, but suddenly turned and ran back inside. Thinking that Ma was still outside, Billie Jo spilled the rest of the kerosene outside, but it splashed right on Ma, turning her into a column of fire. She threw Ma to the ground and tried to put out the flames with her hands.)
6. Ma died that day/giving birth to my brother. (p. 69)
(In one bitter, wrenching moment, Billie loses her mother and her infant brother. Pa, tortured with guilt and sorrow, has found Ma's meager savings and spent them all getting drunk. There's even more tragedy: Billie Jo's hands are so badly burnt that her piano career is over.)
7. I feel such a hunger/to see such things./And such an anger/because I can't. (p. 95)
(In December 1934, the town mounts an art exhibit. Billie Jo goes three times, each time transfixed by the beautiful paintings. But all too soon, the exhibit is packed away and the beauty is no more. Cut off from her music because of her pained, crippled hands, Billie Jo yearns for art and beauty in an empty, desolate life.)
8. Well, I'm leaving first. (196)
(Estranged from her uncommunicative father, her musical hopes in ruins, and frustrated by unrelieved misery, Billie Jo decides to run away. Without telling her father, she hops a train West. She gets as far as Flagstaff, however, then she realizes that she is too rooted in the land and her life to leave--especially this way.)
9. She was my father's teacher at the night school class. (p. 223)
(Pa and his teacher Louise have fallen in love. A perceptive and gentle woman, Louise is helping Pa cope with his many losses. She and Billie Jo become friends and Billie Jo is able to rebuild her own life by example.)

10. Hard times are about losing spirit,/and hope,/and what happens when dreams dry up. (p. 225)
(This passage near the very end of the book summarizes the novel's theme: people who experience tragedy can lose their spirit and their will to go on. Their hope for the future dries up and they feel they cannot go on. Some do, but others wither like the Dust Bowl crops.)

Comprehension Study

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the book.

Questions 1-5 (Literal Level)

- When and where does the story take place?
(Out of the Dust is set in the Oklahoma Panhandle, from the winter of 1934 to December of 1935. It is the middle of the Great Depression and the Panhandle is suffering from a severe drought that has caused a "Dust Bowl.")
- Why does Arley Wanderdale leave town?
(A talented musician, he leaves to sing on the radio. He achieves the career that Billie Jo wanted for herself, but that was impossible after the accident.)
- What happens to Billie Jo's mother and infant brother?
(Polly, Billie Jo's mother, is horribly burned in a kitchen fire. Several days after the fire, she dies giving birth to Billie Jo's brother. He dies the next day.)
- Why does Billie Jo run away?
(She feels that all hope is gone and wants to start a new life, as so many victims of the Dust Bowl had tried to do.)
- Who is Louise? What role does she play in the novel?
(Louise is Pa's night school teacher. She and Pa fall in love and she helps the family rebuild itself.)

Questions 6-8 (Interpretative Level)

- In what ways is the form of this novel different from conventional stories you have read?
(The novel is told in free verse, unrhymed couplets of iambic pentameter, rather than in prose. This may be the only novel students have ever read in this form; indeed, unless they have read Walt Whitman, it may be their first exposure to free verse.)

- Why is the setting so important in *Out of the Dust*?
(The setting can be seen as the central character in the novel. The Dust Bowl destroyed lives, as the dust storms ended any hope of farming in the region. The farmers planted mulberry bushes for windbreaks and plowed furrows deep in the ground to help keep the soil in place -- but the wind blasted the seeds from the furrows and ripped the crops from the ground. To survive, farmers took to hunting jackrabbits; soon, the people in the Panhandle were eating biscuits, beans, and "friend jack"-- all with a generous coating of red dust. It was a time of despair. Families shattered; many people never recovered.)
- What role does the piano play in Billie Jo's life?
(Billie Jo is a very talented musician, and the piano sustains her through her darkest times. Tragically, her hands are so badly damaged in the fire that she is no longer able to play with any skill. She has lost her creative outlet as well as her way to escape from the misery of her environment.)

Questions 9 and 10 (Critical Level)

- Did you like the form of this novel? Why or why not?
(Answers will vary, depending on students' feelings about poetry. Since the poetry is very easy to read and the spare style echoes the characters' sparse lives, most students should find the style ideally suited to the topic and theme.)
- What do you think the accident symbolizes?
(Possible responses: loss of hope, utter despair, tragedy.)

Questions 11-12 (Creative Level)

- Write a free verse poem that describes what happens to the main characters ten years in the future.
- Working with a small group of classmates, discuss some ways that you might have coped with Billie Jo's situation had you been in her place.

Across the Curriculum

Art/Music

- Create a three-dimensional diorama of Billie Jo's home and farm. Label each part of the display with an appropriate quote from the novel.
- Create a collage of newspaper headlines for the time period covered in the novel. Be sure the headlines cover key events in the world as well as in America during that time.

3. Billie Jo learns to play a “rag,” a type of music. Find out more about “ragtime” and play a famous selection for the class. You may wish to start your research by reading up on Scott Joplin.
4. Music is a cornerstone in Billie Jo’s life. Draw a picture showing what the piano means to her.
5. In the poem entitled “What I Don’t Know,” Billie Jo talks about her teacher, Miss Freeland, singing in a play called *Madame Butterfly*. Summarize the plot of the play and share one of the songs with the class.

Language Arts

1. In her Newbery acceptance speech, Hesse remarked, “I was once told that writing historical fiction was a bad idea. No market for it. I didn’t listen. I love research, love dipping into another time and place, and asking questions in a way that helps me see both the question and answer with a clearer perspective.” Explain how you would go about finding information for a young adult novel on the Dust Bowl years.
2. Hesse believes that books can change a person’s life, because John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* changed her life. “The courage, the profound compassion, dignity, and humanity of the Japanese people in the face of such unfathomable destruction helped me see the world in a way I never had before,” she said. Explain what book has changed your life and how.
3. *Out of the Dust* is divided into sections titled with dates rather than names. Replace each of these dates (such as “Winter 1934”) with a chapter title.
4. Billie Jo makes a memory book for her best friend Livie. The book will help Livie remember all the good times they shared. Make a memory book for a close friend, parent, or yourself. Include drawings, photographs, captions, poems, and brief essays about key events in your life.
5. Rewrite one of the poems in prose. Then decide which version you like better and why. Be ready to justify your choice with specific reasons and examples.

History/Social Studies

1. Make a map of the region described in the novel, the Oklahoma Panhandle. Be sure to establish a scale so your map is accurate.
2. Write a travel brochure for Lubbock, Texas, the city where Pa’s Aunt Ellis lives. Include words and pictures that make people want to visit Lubbock for a vacation.
3. Report on President Franklin Roosevelt, who helped lift the country out of the Great Depression. Focus on his “New Deal” and show how it helped the western farmers recover from the dual devastation of bank failures and the Dust Bowl.
4. Billie Jo refers to “everything we lost/when the banks closed.” Find out what she means and why the banks closed. Find out what insurance the federal government mandates banks have today to make sure that people can never lose their life savings in a bank failure again.
5. Watch the 1940 movie *The Grapes of Wrath*, starring Henry Fonda. List at least three new things you learned about the Dust Bowl from the movie.

Science

1. Write a report describing the causes and effects of the Dust Bowl in the Oklahoma Panhandle in the 1930s. In a speech to a small group of friends, explain what (if anything) the farmers could have done to help combat the dual effects of the drought and winds.
2. Explain what makes the wind blows.
3. For two years, the entire community gathers to hold a big dance to collect money for President Roosevelt’s birthday. The money will be sent to the Warm Springs Foundation. Find out more about this organization and what medical condition it is dedicated to wiping out.
4. Imagine you were caught in a dust storm, such as the ones the narrator describes. Brainstorm five ways to protect yourself from injury and even death.

5. Billie Jo talks about the “sod” on the plain. Define “sod” and explain how it is ideally suited for survival in the harsh environment of the Oklahoma Panhandle.

Math

1. On her speed writing test, Hillary wrote “even ton” children” rather than “even ten.” Make a chart showing how much a ton actually is by comparing it to other objects, such as cars, pounds, and elephants.
2. Make a graph showing how much wheat grows on average per month. Compare your numbers with the statistics in the novel to see how difficult it was for the farmers to get their crops to grow in the drought.

Student Involvement Activities

1. Many people left the Oklahoma Panhandle to start a new life in California. Create two teams to debate whether or not people should have tried to start a new life in California or should have stayed on their farms in Oklahoma and waited for the drought to end.
2. In your own words, state the novel’s theme or message.
3. Create a TV panel discussion explaining why *Out of the Dust* received the highest award for children’s literature, The Newbery Medal.
4. Explain why Pa gets drunk after Ma is burned. Recall that he had never before had a drink of any liquor.
5. Using scenes from the novel, create a mural that shows its main events.

Alternate Assessment

1. List examples of difficulties that Billie Jo faced. Then rank these hardships on a scale from most to least difficult. Be ready to justify your rankings.
2. Compile a list of actions that demonstrate how Billie Jo misses her mother.

3. Compose a scene in which Billie Jo’s hands heal enough so that she is able to play the piano well once again.
4. Make a character list and describe each character.

Vocabulary

Match each word to its meaning. Write the letter of your choice in the space provided.

- | | |
|---------------------|--------------------------|
| _____ 1. fierce | A. cruel |
| _____ 2. fidgety | B. trance |
| _____ 3. civil | C. irritated |
| _____ 4. scowl | D. satisfy your thirst |
| _____ 5. riled | E. show |
| _____ 6. whittled | F. shriveled |
| _____ 7. wince | G. twist in extreme pain |
| _____ 8. quake | H. gasoline |
| _____ 9. antiseptic | I. dirt |
| _____ 10. quench | J. frown |
| _____ 11. stupor | K. carved |
| _____ 12. withered | L. complain |
| _____ 13. scorch | M. burn |
| _____ 14. mortgage | N. grass |
| _____ 15. revue | O. shake |
| _____ 16. grit | P. polite |
| _____ 17. sod | Q. cringe |
| _____ 18. kerosene | R. disinfectant |
| _____ 19. writhe | S. restless |
| _____ 20. gripe | T. house loan |

Comprehension Test A

Part I: Sentence Completion (30 points)

Supply a term to complete each of the following statements. Place your answers in the blanks provided in the sentences.

1. Billie Jo has bright _____ colored hair.
2. Arley Wanderdale, the music teacher, asks Billie Jo to play a _____ solo at the Palace Theater on Wednesday nights.
3. One day, Billie Jo wants to play her music for the president, whose name is _____.
4. When they set the table, Billie Jo and her mother place the glasses and plates bottom side up so they won't get filled with _____.
5. Ma wants Pa to dig a _____ in the yard, but he refuses.
6. In Canada, a lady named Elizre Dionne gives birth to _____ baby girls.
7. By accident, Billie Jo spills _____ on Ma and she turns into a column of fire.
8. In the fire, Billie Jo's _____ are very badly burned, too.
9. A plague of _____ eat every single green bit of plant life.
10. Billie Jo's father has _____ on his face but refuses to see the doctor.

Part II: Matching (20 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left. You will have choices left over.

- | | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|
| A. Billie Jo | F. Mr. Noble and Mr. Romney | K. Louise |
| B. Polly Kelby | G. Miss Freeland | L. Franklin |
| C. Bayard Kelby | H. Joe De La Flor | M. Harry Kesler |
| D. Mr. Hardley | I. Mrs. Love | N. Arley |
| E. Mad Dog Craddock | J. Jim Goin | O. Livie |

- _____ 1. Billie Jo's mother
- _____ 2. The young man Billie Jo has a crush on
- _____ 3. Billie Jo's best friend, who moves away with her family to seek a better life
- _____ 4. the farmers who hunt and kill the rabbits
- _____ 5. Pa's teacher in night school, the woman he falls in love with
- _____ 6. Billie Jo's father, a farmer who won't leave the land
- _____ 7. the narrator, a fourteen year old girl
- _____ 8. Billie Jo's teacher, who sings in *Madame Butterfly*
- _____ 9. Billie Jo's brother; he dies when he is only a day or two old
- _____ 10. The storekeeper who cheats people

Comprehension Test A (Page 2)

Part III: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either T for true or F if any part is false.

- 1. Billie Jo is unable to watch Mrs. Brown's cereus plant bloom because it reminds her of fire.
- 2. After the crops fail, Billie Jo's father gets a job stringing electrical wires and installing generators.
- 3. Even after her injury, Coach Albright still wants Billie Jo to play on the high school baseball team.
- 4. Billie Joe wins third prize in the talent contest; her prize is a certificate and a dollar.
- 5. Billie Jo is thrilled when the town sets up a permanent art exhibit in the library.
- 6. Billie Jo's class earns the highest score in the entire state of Oklahoma on the state tests.
- 7. A family of migrant farmers moves into the school while they await the birth of their child.
- 8. The Sheriff takes all the illegal alcohol the men produce and sells it to buy the children food, clothing, and books.
- 9. Billie Jo runs away, getting as far as Flagstaff, Arizona before she decides to come home.
- 10. Louise and Billie Jo do not get along well at all because Billie Joe resents Louise living in the house.

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

- 1. Argue that the government should or should not have done more to help the farmers during the 1930s.
- 2. Analyze the effect of the poetry on the book's theme or main idea.
- 3. Describe the hardships Billie Jo faces and how she deals with them.
- 4. Explain what music means to Billie Jo.

Comprehension Test B

Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Underline a word or phrase from the list below to complete each of the following statements.

1. The story takes place in the **(Texas, Oklahoma)** Panhandle.
2. The action takes place in the mid **(1930s, 1940s)**.
3. The main character is a **(red-haired girl, middle-aged farmer)**.
4. Billie Jo is skilled at playing the **(flute, piano)** and wants to make a career in music.
5. Her dreams are cut short when her hands are crippled by **(infantile paralysis, fire)**.
6. After her mother dies, Billie Jo's father decides to **(move to Arizona, dig a pond)**.
7. Billie Jo is an **(excellent, inferior)** student.
8. Everything in the region is covered in **(mud, dust)** nearly all the time.
9. On the train, Billie Jo meets a man **(leaving home, stealing money)**.
10. At the end of the novel, Louise brings the family **(a book of poetry, apples)**.

Part II: Matching (20 points)

Match the following descriptions with names of speakers from the list below. Place the letter of your response in the blank provided at left. You will have choices left over.

- | | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| A. Billie Jo | F. Mr. Noble and Mr. Romney | K. Louise |
| B. Polly Kelby | G. Miss Freeland | L. Franklin Roosevelt |
| C. Bayard Kelby | H. Joe De La Flor | M. Harry Kesler |
| D. Mr. Hardley | I. Mrs. Love | N. Arley |
| E. Mad Dog Craddock | J. Jim Goin | O. Livie |

- ___ 1. the man whose starving cattle are shot to put them out of their misery
- ___ 2. Billie Jo's mother, a fine musician herself
- ___ 3. Billie Jo's teacher, a woman who bakes cakes for her students
- ___ 4. Bayard's evening school teacher and girlfriend
- ___ 5. the men who shoot rabbits
- ___ 6. the red-headed farmer in love with Louise
- ___ 7. Billie Jo's best friend, who moves to California
- ___ 8. the man whom Billie Jo's brother is named for
- ___ 9. a young man whom Billie Jo likes romantically
- ___ 10. the dishonest storekeeper

Comprehension Test B (Page 2)

Part III: Motivation (30 points)

Complete each phrase below with a reason or justification.

1. Billie Jo got her name because _____
2. Sometimes Mama gets angry when Billie Jo makes music because _____
3. Nearly all the crops are destroyed because of the _____
4. Billie Jo can no longer make music because _____
5. After Ma dies, Pa gets drunk because _____
6. President Roosevelt wants the farmers to plant trees _____
7. Billie Joe likes the art exhibit because _____
8. The migrant farmers show up at the school because _____
9. Billie Jo is upset when the photographer comes because _____
10. Billie Jo comes home because _____

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Hesse said: "Often, our lives are so crowded, we need to hold to what is essential and weed out what is not."
Explain what "essential" elements Billie Jo holds onto in *Out of the Dust*.
2. Analyze the title means and tell why it fits the novel's theme.
3. Describe the novel's setting and explain how it functions as a character.
4. Explain why the author decided to write this novel as a free-verse poem rather than in prose.

Answer Key

Vocabulary

- | | | | |
|------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. A | 6. K | 11. B | 16. I |
| 2. S | 7. Q | 12. F | 17. N |
| 3. P | 8. O | 13. M | 18. H |
| 4. J | 9. R | 14. T | 19. G |
| 5. C | 10. D | 15. E | 20. L |

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Sentence Completion (30 points)

- | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------|
| 1. red | 6. five |
| 2. piano | 7. kerosene |
| 3. Franklin Roosevelt | 8. hands |
| 4. dust | 9. grasshoppers |
| 5. pond | 10. cancer |

Part II: Matching (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. B | 6. C |
| 2. E | 7. A |
| 3. O | 8. G |
| 4. F | 9. L |
| 5. K | 10. D |

Part III: True/False (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. T | 6. T |
| 2. F | 7. T |
| 3. F | 8. F |
| 4. T | 9. T |
| 5. F | 10. F |

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Oklahoma | 6. dig a pond |
| 2. 1930s | 7. excellent |
| 3. red-haired girl | 8. dust |
| 4. piano | 9. leaving home |
| 5. fire | 10. apples |

Part II: Matching (20 points)

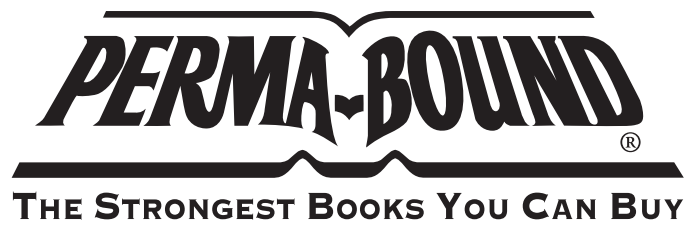
- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. H | 6. C |
| 2. B | 7. O |
| 3. G | 8. L |
| 4. K | 9. E |
| 5. F | 10. D |

Part III: Motivation (30 points)

- her father really wanted a boy instead of a girl
- she is jealous of her daughter's skill
- drought and dust
- her hands are crippled in the fire
- he must dull his pain and sorrow
- to keep the soil from eroding in the wind
- she has a hunger for beauty and culture
- they have no where else to go and they must have shelter
- she is afraid he will make them look bad, like freaks
- she realizes she is rooted in the land; she doesn't want to leave her father just yet

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.



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