Out of the Dust Study Guide

Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse

BOOKRAGS

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Overview

Out of the Dust is Billie Jo Kelby's first person narration of her life near Joyce City, Oklahoma from January 1934 though December 1935 when she was fourteen and fifteen years old.

This part of the Oklahoma Panhandle, near the Oklahoma border, was among the hardest hit areas by dust storms and tornadoes, scorching the earth and causing terrific hardship for the people and animals that persisted to inhabit the land. Billie Jo's father is a wheat farmer, and although his crop has failed year after year, he believes that the rains will surely come and fecundity will be restored to the land.

He is not so much an optimist in his faith that the rains will come as he is a part of the land, which has endured so long and with periods of great fecundity, that it is inconceivable to him that restoration will not occur. Billie Jo is an observer and interpreter, as well as participant, in the horrors that confront her family. She witnesses death by dust, death by fire, starvation, abandonment, mutilation, and other events that would break the spirit of most people. She recounts these tragedies so objectively, poetically, and philosophically that readers may wonder about her emotions as a narrator and human being; but the reality is that farmers trapped in the Dust Bowl during the height of the Depression had no options, and they either accepted and dealt with their situation, or they were reduced to broken, sometimes insane people. Billie Jo is a survivor who relies on a balanced perspective of her capabilities, limitations, and opportunities.

Because Out of the Dust is written as if it is journal entries by a fourteenyear-old girl, it seems deceptively simple, and in fact, the story can be understood and enjoyed by very young readers. It is, however, a sophisticated work of literature that provides the greatest reward for readers who are versed in American history of the 1930s; Freudian psychology; poetic forms and techniques; other literature about the Depression Era; myth; and symbolism.

About the Author

Karen Hesse was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, began college at nearby Towson State University, then transferred on a work study program to the University of Maryland at College Park. There, she worked in the McKelden library, shelving and cataloging books, and helping reference patrons. After graduation she held jobs as a benefit coordinator for the University of Maryland, a librarian, teacher, advertising secretary for Country Journal magazine, typesetter, and proofreader. She married her college boyfriend, Randy Hesse, and now lives with him and their two daughters, Kate and Rachal, in Brattleboro, Vermont. She says that as a typesetter in 1980 she realized that she probably had a talent for writing children's books, but she did not publish her first book for young people, Wish on a Unicorn, until 1991. Since then, she has published at least one book every year—some for young adult readers and others for younger readers—and has quickly gained a reputation as an important writer for young adults. Among her numerous awards, Letters from Rifka (1992) was awarded the Christopher Medal and the Horn Book Fanfare in 1992; The Music of Dolphins (1996) was named Best Book by both Publishers Weekly and School Library Journal for 1996; and Out of The Dust won the prestigious Newbery Award for 1998. Her latest books, Just Juice (1998) and Come On, Rain (1999) are illustrated books for younger readers.

She has written of herself as thin and pasty, friendly but alone even though she was always surrounded by people. She read a great deal, and at Out of the Dust 4829 the age of eleven or twelve discovered John Hersey's Hiroshima, which had a profound effect on her as she understood the horror and dignity with which the Japanese people of that island endured the blast of the first atomic bomb. She writes, "If more books for children had existed at that time with real issues, if I had seen characters survive the engulfing engine of reality, I don't think I would have felt so lonely, so isolated. I write now for children like the child I was, to show young readers that they are not alone in this world. My hope is to help them through hard times, to present characters who survive ordeals and grow as a result of them."

Plot Summary

Billie Jo is a thirteen-year-old girl living in Oklahoma during the dust bowl era. She lives with Ma and Daddy, and, so far, she is their only child. She has red hair like Daddy and long legs and freckles. She loves the piano. In this touching coming of age story, Billie Jo deals with hard times. First, there's the dust. In 1934 and 1935, the time frame of this novel, dust storms cover Oklahoma in a great cloud of despair. Drought, overgrazing and erosion make life here unbearable for Billie Jo. Then there's the fact that her best friend's family moves away to California. Throughout the book, people leave in one way or another, and Billie Jo wishes she were the one leaving.

The good news is that Ma is pregnant, and Billie Jo finds hope in the expectation of new life. The other good news is that Billie Jo is really good at piano. She plays some shows and even earns money at it. Playing piano is a form of escape both figuratively and actually for her as much as an art. When she's in her music, that's all she thinks about. That's the best part, but she also has the chance to travel with a group of musicians, including Arley Wanderdale, his wife Vera, a boy named Mad Dog and a band called Black Mesa Boys.

Billie Jo's relationship with her parents is typical for the era. She's close to them, but they are no experts at showing their love. Billie Jo constantly wishes Ma would offer more support and encouragement. Nevertheless, she is loved, and she knows it. She has a strong family, and she is looking forward to the baby.

From time to time, a little rain might fall, but it's never enough to do any good. The crops are dying. Ma and Daddy argue over what to do. Ma suggests other crops more suited to dry conditions, but Daddy is stubborn. There is a lot of love and commitment in their marriage but also a lot of tension. Billie Jo feels it as one of the many effects of the horrid dust.

Just as the baby is almost due, a terrible accident happens. Daddy leaves a bucket of kerosene next to the stove. Ma thinks it is a pail of water, and she uses it to make Daddy's coffee. It starts a fire instead. Ma runs out to get Daddy, and Billie Jo takes the pail, ready to dump it out the door. Just as she throws it out the door, Ma is coming back inside, so the flaming kerosene lands on Ma, setting her on fire. Billie Jo tries to rescue her, slapping out the flames with her hands. They are both severely burned.

Ma lingers for days in extreme pain, badly burned, and then she delivers the baby, a boy. Ma dies in the process, although it's not clear whether it is from the trauma of the burns combined with the birth or whether she would have died in childbirth anyway. Aunt Ellis comes to take the baby to be with her, but he also dies.

Life becomes a deep, empty hole for Billie Jo at this point. She and her father are both grieving and hurting, but they cannot talk to or help each other. Billie Jo is not only hurting inside. Her burned hands are painful, but she has to take on the roles of cooking and cleaning, which intensifies her pain. Almost as if to make the abstract hole of death

and loss a reality, Daddy starts digging a big hole in the yard. He claims it is for a pond. It seems more likely that it is his way to heal.

For a long time, the world seems an endless cloud of dust, pain and despair. Billie Jo is in great pain, but she makes attempts at playing the piano again. Her hands hurt so much that it is too hard for her. Still, when a talent competition is announced, Billie Jo decides to use it to motivate her. She loves the music, and she struggles through the pain. She knows people blame her for Ma's death, and she knows they can't bear to see her deformed hands. When she performs at the competition, though, she is able to go to that place inside herself where there is only music. The crowd appreciates this and gives her a standing ovation. For a long time after winning third place, pain shoots up her arms, and she can't do anything.

Arley keeps encouraging her to try. Mad Dog seems to take an interest in her. Her father is shut down, though. Then, he decides to start venturing out to a night class to meet some ladies. Billie Jo isn't happy about this, but she accepts the fact that he may someday want to remarry.

Just when it seems things may be starting to look hopeful again, the worst dust storm arrives. Billie Jo and her father are on the way to a funeral, but when they can't go any farther they take refuge in a nearby home. Billie Jo realizes the value of everyone taking care of each other. Events seem to take Billie Jo from hope to despair again and again. She is asked to play piano for graduation at school, but she can't seem to make her hands work. Right after that, a great, long, soft rain soaks the ground with hope. Not long after that, the dust returns.

Worn down to the point where she just can't take it anymore, Billie Jo runs away, hops a train and heads west. It doesn't take her long to realize that she has made the wrong choice. Her greatest fear is being left alone, and she finds now that she is more alone than ever and that she has left her father alone. She returns home, where she and Daddy are able to reconcile and begin anew. Daddy has a girlfriend named Louise, and even though she doesn't want to betray Ma's memory, Billie Jo likes her. Soon, Louise and Daddy get married, and Billie Jo starts to learn the piano again. There is finally hope, which even the dust can't blow away.

Winter 1934,

Winter 1934, Summary

Beginning: August 1920: Billie Jo is born in 1920 in a cabin in Oklahoma. She has a fondness for apples and piano. Her Ma has tried to have other children, but none have lived. She is now pregnant again. When Billie Jo was born, Daddy wanted a boy. Their only family is Aunt Ellis and Great-Uncle Floyd. Billie Jo will be fourteen when the baby comes.

Rabbit Battles: Mr. Noble and Mr. Romney have a contest to kill rabbits because they're eating up the crops. Billie Jo hates it. She can't blame the rabbits for needing food. She thinks the men are stupid for getting so angry with each other over it. At least the meat goes to hungry families.

Losing Livie: Livie is Billie Jo's best friend since first grade. She's moving to California, "out of the dust...where the wind takes a rest sometimes." Livie gives Billie Jo a picture of Billie Jo playing piano with an apple in her mouth.

Me and Mad Dog: Billie Jo is asked to perform a piano solo. Arley Wanderdale, the music teacher, says he thought of her when they asked for talent. She knows he probably thought first of Mad Dog Craddock, a pretty boy with a voice to match.

Permission to Play: Billie Jo has to ask her Ma for permission to perform. She knows if she catches her mother at just the right moment when she's busy and distracted, she might get a yes. Ma is not too happy with Billie Jo's piano playing, apparently because she thinks it's frivolous. Still, Ma is the one who taught Billie Jo to play. Billie Jo gets permission.

On Stage: Billie Jo loves the feeling of performing. She calls it heaven.

Birthday for F.D.R.: Arley asks Billie Jo to play piano for the president's birthday ball. The money raised will go to charity. Billie Jo plans to someday go to the White House and play for the president.

Not Too Much to Ask: Even though their family is "whittled down to the bone these days" because their crops aren't doing well, Ma still donates applesauce, pork and a baby nightie to people even less fortunate.

Mr. Hardly's Money Handling: It's Daddy's birthday, and Ma wants to bake him a cake. She gives Billie Jo money and sends her to Hardly's store. Billie Jo can't help thinking about the sheet music she could buy with the money. Mr. Hardly has a reputation for cheating customers, and he glares at Billie Jo when she comes in. He's struggled recently, when his store had a ceiling collapse. Billie Jo watches him fill the order and notices the smells. When she gets home, Ma counts the change only to discover that Mr. Hardly gave them four cents too much. Ma makes her return the change. Once

again, Billie Jo thinks about using the money to buy music. She gives Mr. Hardly the money and walks out hoping, wondering if he might give her a treat, but he doesn't. It's okay with her, though. Ma wouldn't like her accepting a gift from Mr. Hardly.

Rules of Dining: Billie Jo tells about the rules her mother has for setting the table. Because of the bad dust they have in Oklahoma during this dust bowl era, Ma has them set the plates upside down and the glasses bottoms up. She has them set the silverware covered with a napkin. Then, when it's time to eat, they all turn everything over, leaving circles where there is no dust. Her Daddy makes jokes about the dust, pretending it's pepper or that the milk is chocolate, but really it's all dust.

Livie Killian, the girl who moved away, writes to Billie Jo. Her family can't find work, and her brother ran away to make it on his own. Their troubles make Billie Jo worry what would happen to her family if they had no home, no work or no food.

Breaking Drought: After seventy days of wind, dust, sand and more, it has rained.

Dazzled: Billie Jo knows that in the kitchen, her Ma is a mother. In the barn and fields, Ma is Daddy's wife. In the parlor, Ma becomes a musician. Billie Jo is in awe of her Ma's dazzling piano playing. Billie Jo also sees how her Daddy pays attention to Ma when she plays, the power Ma has over Daddy then. She wants someone to look at her that way someday. Ma started teaching piano to Billie Jo on her fifth birthday, but Billie Jo says she can't play fancy like Ma. She plays crazy, but Arley seems to think it's good.

Debts: Daddy is going to get a government loan to help with the farm. He is sure it will rain soon. Ma says it hasn't rained in three years and what makes him think it's going to rain now? Daddy is mad and goes to the barn so he doesn't argue with his pregnant wife. Billie Jo asks her Ma why Daddy thinks it will rain. Ma says he's a farmer and it's spring. He can't help believing.

Foul as Maggoty Stew: Arley has asked Billie Jo to play her piano in a show called "Sunny of Sunnyside." Some rehearsals are during the school day. Ma will not let Billie Jo miss school to play in a show. Billie Jo wonders if Ma is jealous of her when she's at the piano or if Ma is afraid of where the music will take Billie Jo. Billie Jo obeys her mother's wishes, comes home after school and does her chores and her homework. Inside, she is glaring at Ma.

State Tests: Billie Jo tells Ma their school scored the highest in the state on the achievement tests and that she is the highest in the eighth grade. Ma responds positively, saying, "I knew you could." Billie Jo wishes Ma would gush a little more and make it seem more special.

Fields of Flashing Light: Billie Jo is woken at night by a storm rising. She hears it, tastes it, smells it. She watches as the dust storm ruins their winter wheat crop. As the dust storm turns toward the house, Billie Jo runs back inside where her parents have woken up. Daddy goes outside, while Ma tells Billie Jo to stick rugs under the doors and rags around the windows to keep the dust from coming in.

Eventually, the temperature cools off and it snows dirty flakes. The wind blows what little moisture there is off the ground, leaving just the dust. Daddy comes back in. When he blows his nose it comes out mud. When he coughs, it's mud. She says, "If he had cried, his tears would have been mud too, but he didn't cry."

Winter 1934, Analysis

The free verse poetic form for this book is unusual, especially in a novel for young readers. This series of poems sustains a story throughout the whole book, making it read like a novel, but with the concise and visual language of poetry. At first glance, it seems that not much happens in the book. Each poem is so simple in its telling. However, the story here is not so much in the words on the page. It's more in the words that aren't said. The details used by the author invoke a sense of place and time so effectively that the reader is tempted at times to wonder why all authors don't write in this form.

In the first poem, the readers meet Billie Jo at her birth, and the details she tells us say a lot. She comes in with the summer wheat, so we know she's a farm girl. She comes too fast for the doctor, so we know she is born in an era and place where doctors come to the family's house for a birth. We know she has a "hunger" for playing piano which will become very important in her life. We also learn that her mother is pregnant.

The second poem seems like it might not have any relevance to the story, but it tells us a lot about Billie Jo. We see her reaction to the two men, and her compassion when she finds out the rabbit meat goes to feed hungry families. When her friend Livie leaves for California, Billie Jo acknowledges that she will miss her best friend, but even more than that, she wishes she were the one going away out of the dust.

Through each poem, the readers learn a little more about Billie Jo and the world she inhabits. We meet the people, learn about the lack of rain and the preponderance of dust, come to know that even though their family has little, they have more than many and feel personally connected to Billie Jo.

The author achieves this intimacy through her use of first person, as well as through the poetry. In first person narrative, we can be inside the head of the main character, so we know not only what happens to her but also what she thinks about it. In this case, we find out how she views her parents' relationship, how she feels when she plays the piano in front of an audience, how much the dust permeates their lives and about her relationship with her mother. Most of all, we see how astute this girl is, how she sees beyond the surface of things and understands more than grown-ups might think.

Spring 1934,

Spring 1934, Summary

Tested by Dust: Billie Jo and her schoolmates take a test during a dust storm that blows dust into the building through the cracks in the walls and the windows. She thinks they should get extra credit for that.

Banks: Ma tells Billie Jo that the money they lost when the banks closed will all come back to them. Billie Jo thinks this is good because it will mean they will have money for the doctor when the baby is born.

Beat Wheat: The wheat crop is drying up and dying. The county agent says there won't be enough wheat for seed to plant next season. Billie Jo escapes into her piano, which helps her forget the dust and the bad news. When Ma sends her to the store, Billie Jo sees the "rib-thin cattle" and realizes that the future is grim in the face of this intense drought.

Give Up on Wheat: Ma and Daddy have a discussion about the wheat crop. Ma thinks they should use a windmill to pump a pond for water. Daddy says it will just dry up the well. Ma replies that maybe they should try some other crops that will do better in the dry weather, like cotton or sorghum, but Daddy is determined to grow wheat. It's what he knows. He says her apple trees use up more water than the wheat. Ma is angry about that. She goes out to do her chores, letting her anger subside over time.

What I Don't Know: Billie Jo's teacher is going to sing in *Madame Butterfly*, which Billie Jo has never heard of. Mad Dog, who seems to be her archrival in all things, especially music, says everybody has heard of that. Billie Jo wonders how he knows things that she doesn't, and how much more is out there in the world that other people know but she doesn't.

Apple Blossoms: Two apple trees thrive in the front yard of Billie Jo's home, because Ma has painstakingly cared for them and watered them no matter how much of a drought kills other living things. Billie Jo thinks they are fabulous, especially now in May as the blossoms fall from the trees into her hair. They smell so good. Ma planted these two trees before Billie Jo was born.

World War: Billie Jo's Daddy fought in World War I in France. He doesn't talk much about it, except to remember the red poppies on the graves of the dead. He'll tell about how the war tore up the countryside worse than a tornado or a dust storm, but the poppies would still bloom bright red. Billie Jo wishes poppies would grow out of the dust where she lives.

Apples: The two apple trees' blossoms are now hard, green apples. Eating them now would be awful, but in a few months they will be good. Billie Jo knows that it will be after the new baby is born. They'll have all kinds of good things like sauce and pudding and

cake made from the apples. She'll be able to take one to school, slice it with her knife and eat the juicy slices until her breath "is nothing but apple."

Dust and Rain: A windstorm with red dust roars through, making the sky as dark as night. Rain comes after, but it is a rain that destroys things, washing the soil away and the wheat with it. At the Strong ranch there is no rain, and Billie Jo wonders who's better off. The apple trees have lost some of the hard green apples, but maybe there will still be enough if they don't lose any more.

Harvest: It's time to harvest what wheat has managed to grow. Other farmers are taking their wheat to town to sell. They get a bit of money for it. One farmer gets eight bushels from a twenty-bushel acre, and Billie Jo thinks it will be a miracle if Daddy gets five bushels from his acre.

On the Road with Arley: Playing the piano is about the most important thing in Billie Jo's life. Arley Wanderdale is willing to pay her to play with him and his band as they go on the road. People seem to like her rag tunes. Ma is not too happy about having a daughter out on the road with a band, but knowing Billie Jo is earning money helps. Also, Arley compliments Ma, saying if she wasn't nearly ready to have a baby, he'd take her along to play piano too. Ma finally gives in and says she can go, but only if Billie Jo doesn't complain and gets all her chores done and if Arley's wife, Vera, keeps an eye on her.

Billie Jo chooses a set of songs in honor of Ma being pregnant. They all have "baby" in the title. Billie Jo doesn't care about the money, because she loves playing so much. She also loves being on the road with other musicians. She can forget the dust when she's on the road. She likes seeing new places and having fun. Playing the piano is the topping on the cake.

Spring 1934, Analysis

The main issues in Billie Jo's life revolve around the dust, the wheat, the new baby about to join the family and playing her piano. The dust and the wheat go hand in hand and create a tension in the town and in their home that Billie Jo does not like. The baby and her piano are more pleasant pieces of her life, ones that help her forget the dust.

The dust is a metaphor for all that acts upon Billie Jo to hold her back. It ruins things. It brings rains that destroy rather than nourish. It takes away the sweetness of life, as when it makes new apples fall from the tree before they are ready to eat. The piano brings the sweetness of life back, almost as if the music has a power to dissolve the dust or the bad things in life.

Wheat is the source of everything for most of the people Billie Jo knows. All the farmers grow it, and their livelihoods depend on it. When the wheat crop does poorly, everyone suffers. Ma tries to convince Daddy to switch to a crop that will do better in the drought, but Daddy resists. Billie Jo doesn't like this tension between her parents. She wants everything to be okay.

In "What I Don't Know," we see the essence of what drives Billie Jo. She knows there is much in the world that she is unaware of. If even Mad Dog knows about *Madame Butterfly* but she doesn't, what else might be out there? She seems to have a hunger for knowing and experiencing what's beyond her reach. There is a sense of melancholy and sheer exhaustion from the dust. This oppressive atmosphere is almost too much for anybody. Billie Jo is giddy when she has the chance to leave and experience new places. She is finding her own way to get out of the dust.

Summer 1934,

Summer 1934, Summary

Hope in a Drizzle: A drizzling rain falls, which is maybe not much, but better than nothing. Ma particularly revels in it. She has been aching for rain and driving everyone crazy with her constant comments about it. She stands out in the drizzle thinking no one can see her, but Billie Jo spots her mother with raindrops sliding down her skin. She thinks her Ma is dazzling.

Dionne Quintuplets: The famous Dionne Quintuplets are born in Canada. Billie Jo looks at Ma, so huge in her pregnancy, and can't imagine what five babies would be like. It makes Ma cry just to think of it.

Wild Boy of the Road: A boy shows up at Billie Jo's house, and they feed him. He wants to work for his food, so they send him to work with Daddy. Later, he gets a bath and a haircut. Seeing him makes Billie Jo think of her friend Livie Killian and her brother who went out on his own. The skinny, scraggly boy goes on down the road, and the family watches him. Ma has her hands on her big belly, and Daddy has his chin on the top of Billie Jo's head. Ma says the boy's mother wishes he'd come home, and Billie Jo thinks how many boys are out walking their way to California to a better living where there is green. Someday, she hopes to go to California and make herself a home.

The Accident: Ma is fixing breakfast and grabs a pail she thinks is water, but it's kerosene. It starts a fire in the kitchen. Ma runs outside to get Daddy, and Billie Jo goes inside to get the pail. When she's about the throw the bucket outside, Ma is coming back in. The flaming kerosene hits Ma. Billie Jo tries to stop the fire from hurting Ma and the baby. She beats out the flames with her hands. In the end, both of them end up badly burned.

Burns: At first, the burns don't seem to hurt. The doctor comes to treat Ma and Billie Jo. When he works on Billie Jo's burns, he pulls off the dead, crusty skin. He tests her underlying skin by pricking it with needles. When he puts antiseptic on her, that's when the pain comes.

Nightmare: Billie Jo has a nightmare in which a dust storm sends grit into her eyes and under her clothes, into her ears and nose. In the house, dust gets in through the cracks in the walls, covering everything including her beloved piano. In the dream, she tries to clean the dust off the piano and play it, but it sounds horrible. She hits the piano and it breaks into hundreds of bits. Then, Daddy asks her to bring water for Ma, who has birthed a baby of flames. Billie Jo runs to a neighbor's farm, but no one is there. The house has been ripped up. In the neighbor's house she finds a piano, leaning toward her. She plays, and the music is such a relief, especially after the horrid sounding music at her house. She takes this piano home, but when she gets there, her hands are lumps

with pus oozing out of them. When she wakes up from this nightmare, she says, "the part about my hands was real."

A Tent of Pain: Ma is burned so badly that she is unrecognizable. Daddy has made a tent out of a sheet so that nothing touches Ma's skin. Daddy feeds her sips of water drop by drop from a wet cloth. Ma can't open her eyes, and the baby moves, which makes her groan. The sound is massively painful to Billie Jo.

Drinking: Daddy goes into town on a drinking binge. He finds the emergency money Ma keeps hidden under the threshold in the kitchen. Billie Jo has to stay home and do her best to care for Ma, but she can't do it right and squeezing the cloth hurts her own blistered hands.

Devoured: The doctor is at Billie Jo's house. He sends her outside to get some water, and she sees grasshoppers everywhere, eating up the wheat and everything else around. They eat Ma's garden and the fence posts, and then they hit the apple trees. Billie Jo is not about to let them destroy Ma's precious apple trees, so she climbs in the trees, tearing her tender, scabbed hands, and tries to beat away the grasshoppers. They get the better of her, though, and soon there is nothing left on the trees but a couple of apple cores. Billie Jo can't bring herself to tell Ma about it, but she wouldn't have had the chance anyway. Ma has died in childbirth. Billie Jo has a brother.

Blame: Aunt Ellis comes to take the baby away to raise in Lubbock, but he dies before she gets there. After she leaves again, the neighbor women come to help prepare for the funeral. The minister leads the service, but he doesn't really know Ma, which irritates Billie Jo. The minister asks what the baby's name is, and Billie Jo names him Franklin, for the President. Afterward, the women come to clean and scrub the house. Billie Jo hears their whispers about how she threw the pail of kerosene. They don't mention how Daddy left it by the stove or how he went out drinking. They only blame her.

Birthday: Billie Jo walks into town, noticing the dust, the smell of the air and the dead things along the roadside. Daddy stares at his land, and she wonders what he thinks about - Ma or his wheat that is now gone. Billie Jo tries hard to avoid looking at the grave where Ma and the baby are buried. What she notices is that her hands are like "lumps of flesh" that were once able to play the piano. When she gets to town, she sits down outside Arley's house and listens to his music.

Roots: President Roosevelt tells the people in the dust bowl to plant trees because they will break the wind and send down roots to keep the soil from blowing away. Billie Jo knows better. She knows that trees are not at home in this land, that it is fit for only the prairie grass and the hawks. She knows Daddy will stay, because he is bound to the land. She wonders about her future.

The Empty Spaces: Billie Jo and her father are awkward without Ma around. They don't seem to have anything to say to each other. Billie Jo wants to be alone, yet is terrified of being alone. She says they are shifting to fill the space Ma left. She hides her injured hands, because they seem to bother Daddy.

The Hole: Everything Billie Jo does hurts her tender hands - the heat, the salt, the dust. Meanwhile, her father is digging a pond to use with the windmill, just like Ma suggested. He sends Billie Jo to get scrap wood from the train yard. He works to fix the windmill. Other people, including Billie Jo, think he's crazy. She's about to talk to Ma about it, but she remembers Ma is dead. She thinks she can forgive her father for many things, but not for the pail of kerosene that he left by the stove.

Kilauea: In Hawaii, Kilauea volcano erupts. It ruins everything in its path, and Billie Jo thinks it sounds much like a dust storm.

Boxes: There are two boxes full of mementos of Billie Jo's life, things like baby teeth and school drawings. She had been planning to sort through the stuff with Ma to get rid of things she didn't need, but now Ma is gone. Billie Jo's hands hurt, and she doesn't have the heart.

Night Bloomer: Mrs. Brown has a plant that has bloomed with a flower as big as a plate. Billie Jo goes to her house to see it. She knows Ma would not have let her go, but her father just doesn't seem to care. The plant bloomed at midnight, so by the time Billie Jo gets there it is three in the morning. She wonders how such a big blossom can bloom in this drought. Then, she thinks how it knew to bloom at night when the sun and wind wouldn't hurt it. Dawn comes, and the flower dies. Billie Jo can hardly stand to watch it.

The Path of Our Sorrow: Miss Freeland tells her students how the drought happened. During World War I, the farmland of America was plentiful and produced wheat demanded by a war-ravaged Europe. The price was high, so farmers bought more land and bigger tractors. When the War ended, though, things took a turn down. Europe grew its own wheat, and American farmers had to grow more to make the same amount of money. They plowed up more sod and allowed cattle to graze the land too much. With the sod gone, the water reserves disappeared, and things just dried up. Miss Freeland says it was a gradual thing that happened, not a sudden one. It took a thousand steps. Billie Jo believes it's that way with the sorrow in her life.

Summer 1934, Analysis

There is not much hope in Billie Jo's life this summer, although it starts out hopefully. There is a little rain, and Ma looks radiant in the rain. It makes Billie Jo think of ripening fruit. The birth of the Dionne quints is a good omen. They are all healthy and fine. The visit from the transient boy seems like a portent of a son. Then it all explodes, just like the volcano in Hawaii, with the accident. Even the flaming kerosene is like the flames and heat from the volcano. Suffering from the death of both her Ma and her baby brother, Billie Jo is lost and torn.

Many words and phrases in this section seem to carry multiple meanings. When Billie Jo says, "I got burned bad," it's not just her physical self that is burned but also her emotional self and her trust. She knows Daddy plays a part in the accident, but nobody

blames him at all. They only blame her. When she says, "Ma got burned bad," it seems to acknowledge that Ma's life is not the one she has dreamed of.

From the moment of Ma's death onward, Billie Jo no longer calls her father Daddy. Instead, it's always "my father." The nightmare in the poem by that title is not unlike Billie Jo's real life. Her mother does give birth to a baby of flames who does burn beside her. Billie Jo's only relief is her music, but with her hands so badly burned, that is not allowed to her now, in the time of her life when she most needs it. When the grasshoppers come the same day Ma gives birth, the word "devoured" seems to apply to the crops as well as to Ma. Ma is devoured by the flames from the accident and the struggles of childbirth.

Each poem describes something actual and physical, but underlying the words are the experiences Billie Jo has. On her birthday, the only present she is able to get is listening to Arley's music. Juxtaposed with the recent birthday of her brother, there is much sorrow in it for Billie Jo. In "Roots," Billie Jo tells about the President's plan to plant trees, but she's also talking about her own roots in the place. They are not as deep and rooted as her father's. "Empty Spaces" refers not only to the physical space at the table no longer occupied by Ma, but also to the emotional space she used to fill for both Billie Jo and her father. "The Hole" is not just about the hole Daddy is digging for the pond. It is also about the hole left by Ma's death. The volcano destroys everything, just as the dust storm and the place where they live has cast a long shadow in Billie Jo's life. She realizes that the wind and the dust destroy all in their path, such as the beautiful night-blooming flower, and she wonders if she will be able to escape. This thought is always running through Billie Jo's mind.

Autumn 1934,

Autumn 1934, Summary

Hard Work: Daddy goes to work for the power company digging holes for towers. Billie Jo hopes it will help him feel better, since the crop is obviously not going to produce anything. Billie Jo remembers when her piano playing once brought in a dime here and there, but now she can't bear to be in the room with a piano, especially Ma's.

Almost Rain: Clouds come, and the air smells of rain. It is only enough to make the sidewalk in town damp a little bit.

Those Hands: The basketball coach used to encourage Billie Jo to try out for basketball because she is tall and has great hands. This year, after the accident, he doesn't, because of her injuries. Her father used to tell her to put her hands to good use, but he doesn't anymore. The only person who still thinks she can use them is Arley. He thinks she can play piano again if she tries.

Real Snow: It actually snows, real snow, with moisture, calmness and whiteness. Everything will be happy, especially her father.

Dance Revue: Vera Wanderdale is going to perform a dance revue, and Arley asks Billie Jo to play piano for it. She agrees to try. Mad Dog will be singing. There are special costumes from the city for the show. Billie Jo wishes she could go to help pick them up. Mad Dog stands by the piano during rehearsals. He doesn't stare at her hands or treat her like she's handicapped. He treats her like always, and she is glad for that.

Mad Dog's Tale: Girls hover around Mad Dog at the show and ask him how he got his name. He tells them when he was two years old he used to bite anything he could, like a mad dog. Billie Jo asks her father what Mad Dog's real name is, but he doesn't know. She's pretty sure Ma would have known.

Art Exhibit: An art exhibit at the courthouse is held to help out the library. Billie Jo goes three times. She loves the art, and when the exhibit is over, she is angry because she can't see more art. She knows there is a hunger inside her to "see such things."

Autumn 1934, Analysis

Life without Ma has to go on, and this is how it is in autumn, 1934. Billie Jo seems to be getting some hope back. Her father takes a job in town, a move forward for sure. It almost rains, indicating if not renewal, at least the hope of it. Most importantly, while Billie Jo's hands are damaged so much that her father and the basketball coach don't think she can use them, Arley does. He knows she can play the piano again if she will try. This is what Billie Jo needs: someone who believes in her.

As time passes, it even snows, a cleansing, refreshing snow. Right after that, Billie Jo does play the piano again. Even though she doesn't think she does very well, at least she tries. Mad Dog, who has been her nemesis all through the book, takes on a different role. He treats her normally, and this means a lot to Billie Jo. Her interest in him grows, and she asks her father what Mad Dog's real name is. Her doesn't know, and this again brings up her sorrow at Ma's death. Ma would have known.

Billie Jo is something special, and she seems to have some awareness of this. She attends the art exhibit three times, once with her last dime and twice more at the grace of the exhibit. She sees beauty there, a beauty she doesn't seem to find in dusty, dry Oklahoma. Even though she could sell Ma's book of poetry to pay the admission, she just can't bring herself to do it. She cares so much for the art that she is mad when the exhibit is taken down. The more she sees of such things, the more she yearns for them. She knows there is a bigger world out there somewhere, full of art and music, and she wants to find it.

Winter 1935,

Winter 1935, Summary

State Tests Again: Billie Jo's class at school has done the best in the entire state of Oklahoma, and she feels proud. She wishes she could tell Ma about it and hear Ma say, "I knew you could." She sees now that it would be enough to hear those words again.

Christmas Dinner Without the Cranberry Sauce: At school, there is a Christmas dinner, and all the mothers come. Billie Jo's teacher, Miss Freeland, acts as mother to the motherless girls. They all make the dinner, and it actually turns out pretty good. In contrast, the meal Billie Jo makes at home isn't as wonderful. She doesn't make Ma's famous cranberry sauce, which is her father's favorite. She never had a chance to learn how to make it.

Driving the Cows: A local rancher named Joe De La Flor has a herd of cows he can't afford to feed. The county agent comes out and shoots the cows. Otherwise, their lungs will just clog up with dust, and they will suffocate. In the spring, he will go collect thistle before it gets prickly and feed it to what's left of his herd.

First Rain: Billie Jo lies in bed with a wet cloth over her nose so that she won't breathe in the dust. When she moves around in her bed, it sends the dust up into the air. She swears she will leave because of the dust. Then the rain starts. She hears it on the roof above her bed. In the morning, she walks to school, wanting to stay out in the rain. The farmers have smiles on their faces, glad to have the chance to hope their crops will grow. They feel free of the dust.

Haydon P. Nye: A man named Haydon P. Nye dies. Billie Jo didn't know him well, just well enough to wave to. She remembers that he liked her piano playing. According to his obituary, Haydon was one of the first white settlers who came west when there were still wild horses and wolves. Haydon bought up farmland and then sold it to the railroad. He had seen years of drought and years of plenty. Billie Jo wonders if they will sow wheat on the dirt of Haydon's grave, "where the buffalo once grazed."

Scrubbing up Dust: Billie Jo sees someone scraping up hardened mud, and it prompts her to go home and see her own house through her Ma's eyes, the eyes that saw all the dirt and mess. She knows that Ma was stubborn, and if she were alive she would be cleaning the house as viciously as ever, even with the baby to tend. Billie Jo's father won't notice the mud or anything else. He doesn't talk to her much, so even if things bothered him, she wouldn't know. She feels the burden of taking on the cleaning work, which makes her hands ache so badly. She thinks it wouldn't be so bad to let her hands rest, let the dust rest and let the world rest. She feels haunted by Ma, and so she does the work.

Outlined by Dust: Billie Jo notices how her father watches her as she goes about doing her chores and work. He works hard at his job, at nursing the wheat and at digging their pond. She notices that he sometimes sings while he works. His voice isn't like Ma's, Miss Freeland's or Mad Dog's. His voice sounds as if it's choked with dust. She notices the ways he is like her - the way they both rub the dust out of their eyes and the way he wipes milk from his lip. She imagines what it is like for him without Ma, waking up in bed alone. She realizes her Ma probably didn't want to be a farm wife, but she did what she had to do because she loved her husband. She remembers how her father used to get up in the morning with some of Ma's scent on him, but now he smells of other things. She speculates that he looks at her because he is looking for Ma in her, but she defiantly refuses to make over herself for him. She would give anything to look in the mirror and see anything of Ma staring back, because then she could say she has something of Ma still living on in her. She only sees the resemblance to her father.

The President's Ball: Billie Jo and her father go to the President's Ball, dressed in their nicest clothes. They dance and enjoy themselves to the music of Arley and the Black Mesa Boys. At the end of the night, Arley announces they have raised more money than last year. Last year, Billie Jo remembers, Ma was still alive, and they were happily waiting for the baby. Last year, she played the piano at the President's Ball and at other shows. Hope seems to be coming back to people's lives. They are almost free. Billie Jo notes that she smiled most of the night, and her father laughed twice.

Lunch: The government has sent surplus food, and so the school children have a feast. Little ones have milk mustaches, and older ones help cook and serve. It's a real lunch, the kind that feeds children's brains so they can learn in the afternoon. Billie Jo likes the sound of satisfied children.

Guests: One morning when they go to school, the children find a family has moved into the schoolhouse. There are a father, two children and a grandma. The mother is near the end of her pregnancy, and the father is worried about his wife being out in the elements during a dust storm. Miss Freeland says they can stay as long as they want.

Family School: The school children bring items to put in a pot to simmer and make lunch. They try to eat just a little so the rest can be saved for the live-in family for dinner. They also bring in little toys or clothes for the family. Billie Jo brings in the feed sack nighties that her baby brother never got to wear. The man fixes things around the school while the grandma cares for the children, letting them go play outside when the dust isn't blowing. When the weather is bad, the family stays inside, doing lessons right along with the students.

Birth: One day Miss Freeland tells Billie Jo to keep the kids out of the building because the baby is coming. Billie Jo remembers the birth of her brother, and she prays hard that this baby will live. It does. She has to go off alone to "walk off the feelings." When it is time to go in, she takes her time, still not sure how she will feel. Finally, she goes in to see the new baby girl in her brother's nightie.

Time to Go: Two weeks later the family leaves, all crammed into an old truck. Billie Jo runs down the dusty road behind them. She doesn't want to lose this baby. She hollers for them to wait for her, but they don't hear her. She says they don't look back.

Something Sweet from Moonshine: The sheriff catches some men producing moonshine down by the river. The lawmen take the men into custody, and the sheriff gets rid of all their supplies. However, there is one-half ton of sugar there, and the sheriff can't bring himself to get rid of it. Instead, he gives it to Miss Freeland and tells her to bake stuff for the kids. He says they should "have something sweet to wash down their dusty milk."

Dreams: Billie Jo practices the piano at school every day before and after school. There is a contest coming up, and she plans to compete. There is a cash prize, but she really doesn't care too much about that. She wants to prove to herself and others that she can do it. She wants more than these small town shows. Most of all, she wants people to see beyond her ugly, scarred hands and to see the real her again. Then, she will be able to accept herself.

The Competition: Billie Jo describes the atmosphere backstage at the competition and some of the other acts. The Palace is packed, and Billie Jo knows her father is in the crowd somewhere. The closer it gets to her turn, the more nervous she becomes. At first, her performance is awkward, but it gets better as her song progresses, until at the end she is totally immersed in the music, escaping the pain of her burned hands and only knowing the music. The crowd gives her a standing ovation, and she is happy to win third place. Still, her arms are in such pain afterward that she can't even hold her prize.

The Piano Player: Arley asks Billie Jo to come play in a show at the school. She doesn't want to tell him how much pain she is in and how much it hurts just to play one chord. She tells him no, but after he tells her to practice more, she tells him she'll try. She sits at Ma's piano, the one she won't touch anymore, and she practices in her mind, saving her strength and her pain until the performance. She doesn't want people to say she plays like a cripple.

No Good: Billie Jo plays at the school show, and she believes she does indeed play like a cripple. She's pretty sure Arley won't be asking her to play anymore because her hands are no good.

Snow: It snows, but just to make sure it's really snow and not dust, Billie Jo tests it out by making a snowball. It's real.

Night School: Her father thinks he'll go to night school to learn some skills in case the farm fails. Billie Jo thinks he's sounding practical like Ma. She tells him the farm won't fail as long as they get rain. She sounds like him. She realizes that he probably wants to go more for the company of the ladies in the classes than for the skills he could learn. She knows he's still a good looking, strong man. His attending classes also means she doesn't have to fix dinner, because the ladies bring dinners. That is good for her,

because the heat and water of fixing and cleaning up after dinner makes her hands hurt. When her father goes out to class, she turns her back on him and sits at Ma's piano. She touches it, leaving "sighs in the dust."

Dust Pneumonia: Pete Guymon drives the produce truck that delivers to Mr. Hardly's store. He jokes and talks with Mr. Hardly's son, Calb, while they unload the food. Then, Peter comes down with dust pneumonia and dies, leaving his truck sitting out in front of his drafty shack, while the food goes bad. Mr. Hardly has customers, so he calls a new company to deliver him some food. Within one day, a new produce company sends out a new driver and truck to deliver food supplies to the store. Billie Jo notes that this person doesn't know or care anything about Calb Hardly.

Dust Storm: Billie Jo has gone into town to see the show at the Palace, and when she comes out there is a horrible dust storm. She bumps into things, trips and walks into a telephone pole. As she's making her way home by walking down the road, the driver of a car that had been stranded asks her how she keeps to the road. She tells him she feels it with her feet, one foot on the road, one on the shoulder. He drives away, following her method. She walks along, occasionally stopping at people's houses. They tell her to stay out the storm with them, but she knows if she doesn't go home her father will go out and look for her. Then, he might die, and she doesn't want that burden. She keeps going.

The dust is so bad that it presses on Billie Jo's chest and makes it hard to breathe. It scratches her eyes. It rips at her scarred hands. When she finally gets home, she finds her father gone and a note saying he has gone to look for her. She tries to holler for him out the door, but the wind breaks up and carries her voice away. She waits up for her father. At one point, a neighbor comes in to tell her they found one boy tangled up in a fence and another smothered by the dust. She wonders if her father will die out there.

Billie Jo's father does come home, looking horrible. Billie Jo tries to make some breakfast, but no matter what she does, the food is filled with dust before they can eat it. She thinks her father looks like a different person. She turns the dishes upside down and goes to bed.

Broken Promise: It rains everywhere except there.

Motherless: Billie Jo thinks that if her Ma were still alive and able to comfort her and provide some kindness and hope amid the harshness of life and the environment around them, maybe she wouldn't be so eager to leave this place.

Following in His Steps: Haydon Parley Nye's wife, Fonda, dies. Even though the official cause of death is dust pneumonia, Billie Jo thinks Fonda died because she couldn't go on without her husband. Billie Jo remembers feeling that way after Ma died, but now she sees that life goes on, and you just keep living one day after another. She would like to go, not to die like Fonda, but to get free of this dust-torn world.

Winter 1935, Analysis

The dust is an ever-present force in this novel. It permeates everything. It destroys. It kills. It enters where it's not welcome. Billie Jo aches to leave the dust. Is it the dust itself or the pain and the dried up existence she wants to leave? The presence of the dust makes the setting of this book as much a character as if it were a person. It is able to impact lives in an eerie, evil way.

Ma is mentioned in almost every poem of this section. Obviously, she was an important influence in Billie Jo's life. Even after her death, Billie Jo constantly compares how Ma would have responded to something to how her father now responds. She sees her father anew and pays more attention to him than she used to. She empathizes with him, understanding how he is.

Leaving is a common theme. People die, and Billie Jo wishes she could leave, though not through death. She notes how deaths change the community. When the transient family goes through and leaves again, she wishes beyond anything that she could leave too. Something must be holding her there. It might be her dedication to Ma or her obligation to her father. It might be that she feels crippled now and unable to go away.

The piano, a recurring theme throughout the book, is both hopeful and a source of pain and agony for Billie Jo. No matter how much pain it causes her, she keeps returning to it, until finally she is able to once again touch Ma's piano. This is an important step forward for Billie Jo, a healing act.

Spring 1935,

Spring 1935, Summary

Heartsick: Billie Jo acknowledges that she is kind of sweet on Mad Dog. He could have any girl, so why would he want her? She can't talk to her father about it. If Ma were there, she could talk to Ma. Then, Ma would reassure Daddy, but without her, they don't talk.

Skin: Billie Jo's father has some spots on his face. She seems to know what they are, since his father had them too. However, she doesn't specify what they are.

Regrets: Arley still comes to school to teach, but Billie Jo doesn't go by his place anymore. She doesn't see him, or Vera, or Mad Dog, but when she does, they are polite to her. She hides her hands to avoid having everyone look at them. Mad Dog seems kind of sweet on Billie Jo. He walks her home sometimes and treats her kindly. She seems leery of the fact that he is quiet when the other girls aren't around. She knows she should avoid him, but she doesn't.

Fire on the Rails: Fire is something Billie Jo hates completely. She can't escape it. Everything is so dry that things start on fire easily. The school catches on fire. Some railroad cars start on fire. Since it's pretty hard to put out a fire without water, which is not easy to come by in a dust bowl, the cars burn away until they are just steel. People don't mention fire to Billie Jo because they know about the fire that changed her life, but she hears what they say anyway.

The Mail Train: The mail train gets stuck in the dust. It drifts like snow, and it blocks the tracks. On that mail train is a letter from Billie Jo's Aunt Ellis. She wants Billie Jo to come live with her in Lubbock, Texas. Billie Jo wants to get out of Oklahoma, but she doesn't want to go to Lubbock or live with Aunt Ellis. When she asks her father what she should do, he tells her to wait and see.

Migrants: With so few farms producing crops, the migrant workers are leaving in droves. They say not to forget them. They'll be back. Billie Jo isn't at all sure that they will be back. If they go to California and everything people say about California is true, then they won't be back. She wonders how she is supposed to remember them all.

Blankets of Black: Miraculously, two days of clear blue come to Oklahoma, and people start to think that maybe the plague is over. Maybe things will start to get good again. A lady named Grandma Lucas, who is not related to them, has died, and they decide to go to her funeral. While they drive to Texhoma, a black cloud starts to move across the sky. Birds fall trying to get ahead of the dust. It seems to Billie Jo that night falls in an instant. Unable to go any further, her father stops the truck and pulls her out. They feel their way to a nearby house, and the family that lives there lets them in, as well as everyone else in the funeral procession.

Billie Jo says this is the worst dust storm they have ever seen. It might have broken them all if they had not been together, helping each other. The storm lets up, and the funeral procession continues. Billie Jo and her father go home instead of to the funeral. What they find is not good. Dust dunes cover most of their barn, and the animals are not doing well. The door to their house has been blown in, and dust covers everything in their house, including Ma's piano.

The Visit: Mad Dog comes to visit Billie Jo, not to court her, but to tell her something. He is going to Amarillo to sing on the radio and maybe get a job there. She can't believe that he would leave his farm and school. He doesn't seem to care. He tells her he loves this land. He stays later than he had intended, and when he walks down the road, the dust lifts up and leaves a trace of him.

Freak Show: James Kingsbury, a photographer from Canada who took the photos of the Dionne quintuplets that made them famous, comes to Oklahoma to take pictures of whatever oddities he can find there. They show him the sandiest house and the boniest cow. Billie Jo wonders what sort of freak show it will make of them, since the photos of the quints turned them into a freak show.

Help from Uncle Sam: The government lends money to farmers to help them keep going. There's money for seed and for feed. Billie Jo's father is worried about how he will pay back the money, but the government lady says not to worry. He signs on, putting the paperwork on the shelf with Ma's book of poetry and Aunt Ellis's invitation. Billie Jo feels that invitation looking down on her all the time.

Let Down: Billie Jo is invited to play piano for graduation, but when she goes to play, she can't. Arley Wanderdale can't look at her. Miss Freeland cries. She feels she has let them down. Billie Jo leaves the stage. She hopes maybe her father will go to the doctor about the spots on his skin and maybe she can get the doctor to look at her hands. Her father isn't going to the doctor, though. She thinks they'll both turn to dust.

Hope: A slow, soft snow begins, changing gradually to sleet and then a gentle rain. The rain seems to patiently fall as the dried up earth softens and is readied for harder rain. Then, the rain comes harder, soaking into the earth, soaking everything. Billie Jo's father dances in the rain and goes out to the barn to clean the dust out of his tractor. He has some hope that he will need it.

The Rain's Gift: The farmers let their cows graze on the new grass brought by the rain. Joe De La Flor, a neighbor farmer, is so happy that he sings as he rides his horse.

Hope Smothered: The rain's gifts are soon gone. A new storm brings dust. Just as Billie Jo is cleaning up the dishes, the dust dirties them. Mrs. Love, the government lady, takes applications for males to work CCC jobs. Billie Jo wishes she could do that, maybe far away from here.

Sunday Afternoon at the Amarillo Hotel: On the day of Mad Dog's performance on the radio, everyone goes to the hardware store to listen. His voice is beautiful. Arley and the Black Mesa Boys are there too. Billie Jo wishes she were there with them, but everyone

else is just content to stand around and listen. When Mad Dog is done singing, the townspeople cheer as if they were the ones on the radio. Billie Jo wants to be happy for him and cheer too, but her throat feels choked off, snapped shut like a trap. She knows Mad Dog is master of his future.

Baby: A baby is abandoned on the church steps. The minister takes it to the doctor for a checkup. Billie Jo asks her father if they can adopt the baby, but he says they can't give that baby anything, including a mother. Instead, he gets out the box of baby clothes for baby Franklin and suggests that she offer them to the abandoned baby. In the box, Billie Jo also finds the dimes Ma saved from Billie Jo's piano playing that she was going to use to study music at Panhandle A and M. She thinks there's no point in saving them now. After she drops the box off at the church, she comes home and sits in front of Ma's piano, trying to imagine a song for all the special babies she knows about.

Old Bones: Dinosaur bones are discovered in Oklahoma, and Billie Jo can easily imagine her world filled with dinosaurs, like large cows scratching their rumps up against the barn. She imagines Joe De La Flor herding dinosaurs, and it makes her smile. She wants to go see the dinosaur bones before they are shipped away. She thinks how the dinosaurs are getting out of Joyce City way too late to appreciate it. Her father thinks about her wish to go for a while, staring at the graves of Ma and Franklin, and then he tells her they should leave the dead alone.

Spring 1935, Analysis

One of the truly amazing aspects of this book is how much is said by not saying things. Using Billie Jo as the narrator gives the author a unique vantage point. Billie Jo is a young girl stating what she thinks to be the obvious, but the reader is left to infer more meaning behind the words, both those written and those unwritten. For example, in "Heartsick" Billie Jo never states which makes her more heartsick - that Mad Dog can have any other girl and probably would never choose her or that she and her father can't communicate or even show their feelings to each other. "Skin" doesn't mention what the spots are - perhaps skin cancer, perhaps pox of some sort, we don't know specifically. In "Regrets" we are not sure if it's the loss of her piano playing that makes Billie Jo regretful or if it's her non-relationship with Mad Dog.

"Fire on the Rails" uses up a lot of space describing the events of the fires, but what it really is meant to tell us is how it feels to Billie Jo that other people don't speak to her about fires. She's outcast out of sympathy. Folks mean to spare her pain, but by treating her differently, they cause her more pain. She doesn't say this in the poem, but the emotion is there. In "Freak Show" there is an underlying, unspoken emotion that Billie Jo, because of her deformed burned hands, is a freak show, showing again that she is outcast.

"The Mail Train" depicts Billie Jo's uncertain future. She would love to leave, but she is not keen on living with Aunt Ellis. Without her even saying so, we know that she is worried her father might send her away. In "Migrants," yet another group of people get

to leave. Always, someone else gets to leave, but not her. "The Visit" is another moment in which someone else gets to leave, but not her.

The poem "Blankets of Black" is one of the longer poems in this section, and so it seems to hold more significance. It's more than just the telling of a bad dust storm and the way they survived. It is Billie Jo's realization that no matter how bad things get, and this is pretty bad, the way to survive is by the association with one's community. Other people make it all worthwhile, she sees, otherwise there's really no point. Still, none of this is explicitly stated.

Each poem in the book seems a simple, prose-like narration of events. Just below the surface, though, ready to erupt with as much force as the volcano in Hawaii, are Billie Jo's intense feelings, her struggles to find herself and her desire for her father to love and forgive her. Deeper still is her knowledge that the land has a hold on the people and that hers is a love/hate relationship with the land and with herself.

Summer 1935,

Summer 1935, Summary

The Dream: In this poem, Billie Jo talks to her piano as if it is her mother. She loves her piano because it comforts her and accepts her.

Midnight Truth: Billie Jo relates the bitterness she feels over her Ma's death, her father's indifference and the dust. She acknowledges that her mother and she could have loved each other better. She talks about how alone she feels even in the presence of her father. She thinks the pond he is digging is really his own grave. She will leave him before he leaves her.

Out of the Dust: Billie Jo sneaks out in the middle of the night with a little money and a little food. She leaves her father's house and hops a train going west, out of the dust.

Gone West: Billie Jo has been on the train for two days. She's burned up and frozen. She has seen migrants along the tracks. Now she sees a girl watching the train.

Something Lost, Something Gained: A man gets on the train and shares the car with Billie Jo. He's dirty and stinky, and he asks her for food. Then, he tells her about his family, whom he could no longer care for. She tells him about her life. What they have in common is that they are both afraid of being alone in the world. Billie Jo realizes that what she's done has left her father alone in the world. The man is gone when she wakes up. He's taken the rest of her food, but he left her the picture of his family that he had showed her. She gets off the train in Flagstaff and calls Mr. Hardly to tell her father that she's coming home.

Homeward Bound: Billie Jo says going away wasn't better. It was lonely. It made the space between her and her father vaster than ever.

Met: Billie Jo's father meets her at the station, and she calls him Daddy again. She tells him all the things she's been thinking. He is like the sod, rooted and solid, and she is like wheat. She can grow, but only if she gets the care and love she needs. She tells him she is worried about the spots on his face, and he says he'll see the doctor. He tells her the pond is almost done, and she can plant flowers. All the while, she is forgiving him, and she is forgiving herself.

Summer 1935, Analysis

Here is where all that emotion boils to the surface finally. The first poem of the section poignantly tells how Ma's piano represents Ma to Billie Jo, as well as how much she loves the piano. In the next poem, she relates her bitterness at all the things in her life she wishes were different: her Ma's death, the dust and her father's silence. When Billie

Jo runs away and hops on the train, there is at once hope and deep sadness. The reader almost wishes she would stay. What will she have without her father?

Meeting the man on the train helps Billie Jo see that what she really fears more than death and dust and silence is being alone, with no one to count on. She realizes that she has created that aloneness for her father, and that he is a solid, sod-like, rooted person. She wants to go home. When she gets there, she allows herself to express her emotions to her father, and he responds, perhaps hesitantly, but kindly. Now real healing can begin.

Autumn 1935,

Autumn 1935, Summary

Cut It Deep: Daddy goes to see Doc Rice, who chastises him for not coming sooner. Daddy has cancer, and Doc does his best to remove it. Billie Jo asks him what to do about her hands, and he gives her the advice to use them. Billie Jo and Daddy go through the two boxes Ma had saved. They keep almost everything, because there is so much of Ma there. Daddy tells her he wasn't always sure the way he is now and that he thought of running off, too. He didn't have as much spunk as she has. She sees more than ever that they are alike in a good way.

The Other Woman: Daddy has a lady friend named Louise who stayed by his side while Billie Jo was gone. Louise is a good cook, and she can get Daddy to wash dishes. Billie Jo likes her in spite of herself. She doesn't know how things will work out, but she sees that Daddy needs Louise. She asks Daddy if he wants her to go off to Aunt Ellis's, and he says he never wanted that. They get a good laugh at her expense. Even though she likes Louise, Billie Jo is cautious. She doesn't want to get pushed out of Daddy's life now, when she's just making a new path into it.

Not Everywhere: The one place Billie Jo won't let Louise go is to the graves of Ma and Franklin. Even though she might be part of their lives now, Billie Jo doesn't want her invading this part.

My Life, or What I Told Louise After the Tenth Time She Came to Dinner: Billie Jo tells Louise that she has her mother's hands, piano hands. She tells Louise about the piano and the things Ma used to do. Ma used to arrange the items on the shelf above the piano. She tells Louise how when she ran away, she was looking for something, but she couldn't find it because nothing is better than home. She tells Louise that her hands aren't pretty, but they are getting better. She is not quite ready to clean the dust out of the piano. Louise listens but doesn't give any advice, and Billie Jo likes that.

November Dust: Billie Jo walks around the farm with Daddy. Even though the dust still blows sometimes, there is wheat growing. There is grass, and the apple trees are still alive. Mad Dog visits once a week when he's in town from Amarillo, where he works on the radio. They may not have much, but it's more than last year.

Thanksgiving List: Billie Jo has made a list of all the things she is thankful for, which are many. They include Daddy's smile, his laugh, food without dust, damp earth, hope and most of all home, both outward and inward.

Music: Billie Jo is getting to know music again. She likes it. She feels herself in it. She realizes that all the time she was trying to get out of the dust, she is what she is because of the dust. She likes who she is.

Teamwork: Louise and Billie Jo walk around after dinner, while Daddy washes up. Louise was Daddy's teacher in night school. She never married and only realized she was lonely when she met Daddy. She is good for them. Daddy takes her out to Ma's grave to tell Ma what his intentions are with Louise.

Finding a Way: Daddy discusses what new crops to plant. Billie Jo plays her piano, letting her skin stretch. She philosophizes about hard times, saying that hard times are mostly about losing hope and spirit, not about being poor, not about dust. Daddy and Louise get married. She brings apples, perfect apples, and arranges them in a bowl on the shelf opposite Ma's poetry book. They live their lives. Billie Jo plays the piano.

Autumn 1935, Analysis

This is the denouement of the novel. Billie Jo has forgiven Daddy, and they are seeing the Doc to get some help for his spots and her hands. Louise is turning out to be nice and sensitive to the history of the family she's joining. Things get all wrapped up, and the reader has a sense of hope and renewal.

Characters

Billie Jo

Billie Jo is a thirteen-year-old girl and the narrator of the story. She lives in Oklahoma during the dust bowl and blames herself for the accident that burns her and her Ma. She is a thoughtful, emotional, caring girl with a talent on the piano. She has a way with young children and anxiously awaits the birth of her brother, who dies before she can know him. She wishes that there were a way out of the dust-worn world she inhabits. She thinks about it a lot, and she sees other people getting to leave, but not her. When she finally takes the risk and leaves, she realizes it isn't what she wants after all. She realizes how tied to the land she is and how important her family and community are to her.

Ma

Although Ma is alive only partway through the book, she is always present. Not a day goes by that Billie Jo doesn't think of her. In fact, the readers know Ma better after she is dead. What we know about her before her death is that she is strict with Billie Jo and at the same time wants to encourage her talent. Still, Ma seems to know that sometimes dreams and talent don't do anything for you. Billie Jo says after Ma dies that she thinks Ma had dreams once, and that she wasn't cut out to be a farmer's wife, but that she changed herself to satisfy her husband.

Daddy

A farmer through and through, Daddy never gives up on hoping for rain and hoping his wheat will grow. When Ma dies, though, Daddy does seem to lose hope for a long time. He shuts down and takes his despair inward. He digs a big hole that is supposed to be a pond, but nobody thinks that there will ever be enough water to fill it. He never gives up, though. He is torn up by his wife's death, but he is pragmatic, too. He does not want to be alone, so he searches out the company of other ladies via a night school class. Eventually, he courts and marries his teacher, Louise.

Franklin

Franklin is Billie Jo's baby brother who dies shortly after he's born.

Arley Wanderdale

Arley is a musician and the school music teacher, who encourages Billie Jo's talent before and after her accident. He plays with a band called the Black Mesa Boys, and he

takes Billie Jo along to shows, trying to help her along the path to using her talent. He never stops believing in her even when he hands are burned and don't work like they used to. He also encourages other musicians, such as Mad Dog, whom he eventually accompanies to Amarillo to sing on the radio. He's Billie Jo's musical mentor.

Mad Dog

Mad Dog is a boy who seems to be about Billie Jo's age. He is almost her nemesis at first, a rival musician. She doesn't seem to like him much. As the book goes on, however, Billie Jo has more respect for him, and he for her. Eventually, he leaves Joyce City to go to Amarillo, Texas to sing on the radio. He comes back to visit her.

Miss Freeland

Miss Freeland is Billie Jo's teacher. She is an encouraging and generous person who truly cares about the students as if they are her own. Miss Freeland sings, cooks and must be a good teacher, because her students score high on state tests.

Livie

Livie is Billie Jo's best friend who moves away. She doesn't appear in most of the novel, but she represents the first person in Billie Jo's life who leaves the dust.

Aunt Ellis

Aunt Ellis is Daddy's sister who comes to take baby brother Franklin away but arrives too late. She also sends a note inviting Billie Jo to live with her in Lubbock. Billie Jo doesn't like her too much and certainly doesn't want to go live with her. She seems to have a stern manner and appearance, even though Billie Jo never really describes her.

President Roosevelt

President Roosevelt is depicted as a hero, a good guy. The town has a Presidential Ball every year. The President helps out the poor farmers with feed, seed and jobs through the CCC.

Mr. Hardly

Mr. Hardly is the owner of the store nearby and often overcharges his customers. Billie Jo thinks he is not very nice because he doesn't offer her a little peppermint stick or anything when she returns the money he accidentally gave her as change.

Wild Boy

The wild boy comes to Billy Jo's home just before the accident. The boy is polite and works hard. Ma knows he has a mother somewhere who wants him to come home.

County Agent Dewey

Only a minor character, County Agent Dewey is mentioned a few times. He takes charge of monitoring things like crop successes and cattle health.

Doc Rice

Doc is the local doctor who comes when Ma gets burned and delivers the baby. He sees Daddy at the end of the book about his skin cancer, and he gives Billie Jo good advice to help her hands heal.

Joe De La Flor

Joe De La Flor is a neighboring farmer and rancher. He seems to be quite a character, but a good neighbor.

Haydon P. Nye

Haydon is one of the first white settlers of the area who busted sod to grow wheat. He dies during the story, and Billie Jo wonders if they will plant wheat on his grave.

Fonda Nye

Fonda is Haydon's wife, who dies two months after he died. Billie Jo figures she just couldn't stand to go on living without her husband.

Buddy Williams and His Family

This family lives at the schoolhouse for a time, while the mother gives birth. They help out fixing things, study the lessons with the children and appreciate the generosity of the town.

Louise

Louise is the woman that Daddy falls in love with and marries after Billie Jo returns home. Despite herself, Billie Jo likes Louise for being honest and for not trying to take over and be Ma. Louise is gentle, a good listener, a good cook and a kind person.

Objects/Places

Piano

The piano is arguably the most precious object in this novel. It's a key element in Billie Jo's life, and it represents her Ma, her yearnings for freedom and her acceptance of herself.

Dishes

While the dishes don't seem too important in the big picture, the fact that Ma puts the dishes on the table upside down so they don't get dust in them indicates the level to which the dust permeates every part of their lives.

Dust

A never-ending obstruction to a good life, the dust is an obstacle to everything Billie Jo yearns for.

Joyce City

Joyce City is the town near the farm where Billie Jo lives. While she doesn't say much about it, the reader gets the impression that it is a small and very old pioneer town, not much different from when it was first settled.

Mr. Hardly's Store

Hardly's store isn't all the way into town. It is a convenient place to get essentials in a pinch, even if they are not fresh and even though Mr. Hardly cheats the customer in change quite often.

Rain

There is never enough rain in the book until the end, when it comes and soaks things for days. Usually the rain is scanty at best, and what rain does fall serves only to erode the soil more. It can be both a blessing and a curse - a blessing for obvious reasons and a curse because it leads to false hopes.

The Palace

The Palace is the local theater where Billie Jo first performs on the piano in public. Many local events are held here.

Apple Trees

Ma plants the apple trees and tends them with loving care. During the worst of the drought, they are shriveled and destroyed by the grasshoppers that come just as Ma dies. By the end of the book, however, the apple trees are in better health. They serve as a symbol of the health of the family.

Kerosene

The bucket of kerosene is a very significant object in this book. It is responsible for causing the horrible accident that burns Ma and Billie Jo. Because of it, Billie Jo's life changes forever in ways she does not want.

Hands

Billie Jo's hands are important to her because they connect her with her music. When they get burned in the accident, they are a source of pain both physically and emotionally. The one thing she has is the piano, but her hands don't heal fast enough. They let her down when she can't rely on them.

Grasshoppers

Another plague like the dust, the grasshoppers are more destructive. However, they only last a short while.

The Pond

Billie Jo's father digs a big hole he plans to make into a pond. Everyone questions why in a severe drought he thinks he will be able to fill it with water. If nothing else, Daddy is a man who looks to the future. Even in his current struggles after the death of his wife and son, he finds this way to hope. The pond is also a symbol of the big hole left in his heart by the deaths of Ma and Franklin, and when the pond has water by the end of the book, the hole is partly filled by Louise, although his wife is not forgotten.

Kilauea

This volcano in Hawaii erupts and destroys, just like the dust in Oklahoma.

Boxes

Two boxes in Billie Jo's closet hold a lot of mementos from Billie Jo's life. Just after Ma's death, she can't bear to go through the boxes, but by the end, she is able to have Daddy go through them with her. This represents not only her healing, but also the healing in their relationship and the need for them to hold onto memories of Ma.

Art

An art exhibit is held in Joyce City, and Billie Jo loves it. She goes three times. She knows there is more to the world than dust and heartache. She yearns for the beauty of art, and she is sick when it is packed up again.

Cranberry Sauce

Ma used to make the best cranberry sauce, but Billie Jo never learned how to make it from her. Louise doesn't attempt to make it.

Food

Billie Jo's family seems to always manage to have adequate food, but not everybody does. Those who have even a little are generous with those who have nothing.

The Competition

While not a concrete, physical object, the talent competition is important to Billie Jo. She has something to prove to herself, and she performs well, even though the result is more pain and a period where she can't play at all.

Night School

Pa goes to a class to meet women, and he ends up dating and then marrying his teacher.

Spots

Daddy has spots on his face, and Billie Jo knows they could kill him, the way they did her grandfather. She doesn't understand why Daddy would not want to go to the doctor about them. In the end, she expresses herself to Daddy, and he does go to the doctor.

Panhandle

The panhandle is the part of Oklahoma where Billie Jo lives.

Amarillo

Amarillo is the town in Texas where Mad Dog goes to sing on the radio.

Lubbock

Lubbock is the town in Texas where Aunt Ellis lives and where Billie Jo does not want to go.

Dinosaur Bones

Dinosaur bones are discovered in Oklahoma. They will be shown to the public before being shipped off. In Billie Jo's mind, the bones tell the story of a species that didn't get out in time.

Train

Billie Jo hops a train to head west when she runs away. On this train, she meets a man who sets her right without even trying to.

Ma and Franklin's Graves

The graves are like holy ground to Billie Jo, and even though in the end she is willing to let Louise into her life, she refuses to let Louise come to the graves.

Apples

Billie Jo loves apples. The apple trees, in a good year, produce delicious fruit used to make all kinds of tasty treats. When Louise marries Daddy, she brings a big bunch of apples into the house and puts them in a bowl. It symbolizes that there is a mother in the house again, because Ma used to do that. Louise places the bowl of apples on a shelf by the piano, opposite the shelf where Ma's book of poetry is kept. She acknowledges by this action that she is equal with Ma, but not intending to try to replace Ma.

Ma's Book of Poetry

The book of poetry is a special memento of Ma that Billie Jo and Daddy both cherish. It holds a place of honor on a shelf near the piano. Even though Billie Jo loves the art exhibit enough to go three times, she will not sell Ma's book of poetry. It is sacred.

Setting

Joyce City, Oklahoma is not a city at all—although there are a few stores, a school, a community center, and a hotel—but a farming community in one of the most desolate parts of the U.S. in 1934-1935. Dust storms have ravaged the land for four years, and in this, the fifth year of drought, almost nothing has survived. Every year Billie Jo's father, Bayard, and the other farmers, have planted their fall crop of wheat, only to have most of it churned up and destroyed by continuing dust storms. Joe De La Flor, a cattleman, barely keeps his herd alive because there is nothing to feed them but tumbleweed.

Dust permeates absolutely everything, and one of the strengths of Hesse's writing in this novel is her excruciating descriptions of the pestilence of dust. Chapter after chapter the presence of dust takes its toll on the characters' spirits until finally the great storm comes that buries tractors and animals, and kills people trapped in the open. The biblical prophesy of "dust to dust" is the literal physical condition of the characters. Dust has so infiltrated their bodies that they are on the verge of being transfigured into a heap of dust, into death. In her nightmare, which is no different from her reality, Billie Jo says I was coming home through a howling dust storm, my lowered face was scrubbed raw by dirt and wind.

Grit scratched my eyes, it crunched between my teeth.

Sand chaffed inside my clothes, against my skin.

Dust crept inside my ears, up my nose, down my throat.

I shuddered, nasty with dust.

The action shifts between Billie Jo's house—a shack typical of destitute farmers—her school, the community center where she plays the piano, and various outdoor settings. When she decides to leave home, she hops a box car. But the physical setting is not nearly so important as Billie Jo's conscious interior. Her mind is a room which the characters and events seem to inhabit. Rather than moving into physical space, Billie Jo draws physical space into her interior so that it seems that almost every scene transpires within her mind.

Social Sensitivity

Out of the Dust is a high-minded, literary work that contains nothing that would offend a sensitive reader.

The absence of homage to God or salvation is not sacrilege but an aspect of Old Testament stoicism that Hesse wishes to imbue in Bayard. There are many aspects of community life that Billie Jo simply does not address, and religion is one. Readers who believe that the worship of God precedes and permeates everything else, especially redemption and salvation, may find the absence of religion offensive, but it is simply not part of the story Hesse wishes to tell. Had she included religion, she would have brought an entirely new element to the story that would have clouded the drama she has created.

As a historical snapshot of the Depression Era, Hesse provides an effective portrait of the misery and entrapment of Dust Bowl farmers and ranchers. Page after page she describes the dust, to the point of excess and even monotony for the reader; yet this was the condition of the land. If readers felt the seemingly eternal never ending descent of dust, imagine how the participants felt after five years of drought. Hesse's positive portrayal of federal government benevolence may seem patronizing to people critical of the central government today, and they may question whether this aspect of Hesse's story was necessary to develop and resolve the tragedy of Billie Jo's life.

In the first few pages Billie Jo takes a strong stand against eradicating rabbits, even though they are desiccating what little foliage remains. She especially objects to clubbing them to death, and of the sport that is made of killing them. Hesse never really places this in context of Billie Jo's development, except as it reflects her youth and innocence at the beginning of the novel, and it serves more as characterization than political statement about animals. By the time Joe De La Flor's herd is so desiccated that government agents must systematically kill his cattle so they will not suffer, Billie Jo understands the humanity/necessity of sparing them the agony of slow, certain death. It is probably the attitude of the people who kill animals rather than the killing itself that offends her.

Literary Qualities

Hesse has imbued her novel with many literary precedents and innovative techniques, which are among the most interesting qualities of the novel.

The most obvious are Hesse's use of sentence structure, line break, and chapter divisions. Readers will certainly ask why this book is considered a novel rather than a diary or poem, since it has all of the characteristics of the diary and poetic forms, and since reviewers have referred to it as all three. Its diarylike qualities include the following.

Each entry contains a date, and even though the day of the month is not specified, it is clear that each event chronologically follows the next. The headings for each entry are more like personal tags for remembering the entry than chapter titles that designate novelistic structure. Fourteen year olds normally do not write novels, while keeping a diary or journal was typical of many American teenage girls during those and subsequent decades. And most important, the line length is short, truncated before the edge of the page requires it. This suggests that Billie Jo is writing for herself, unconcerned with the structure of the sentences; it may also suggest that she has written her diary in a smaller book, and that when it was published in standard book form, the lines did not fill the page.

These are very good arguments in favor of the form being a diary; there are other arguments for its being a novel, and reasons why the distinction is important. True diaries, as opposed to literary diaries, are not self conscious and are not written with an audience in mind other than the diary keeper. People usually keep diaries to express their innermost feelings, to serve as a reminder in future years of their past. The most famous diary of our century, Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl (1952; see separate entry, Vol. 1) is not written for anyone to read. In fact, Anne was terrified that her mother might find and read it, and even after the diary was turned over to her father, he expurgated sections before he would allow it to be published.

Billie Jo's "diary" is written with the intent that not only will someone read it, but that a total stranger will read it.

She explains facts about the community, other people, and herself that would require no explanation in a diary. Second, and more subjectively (critics disagree on this point), the people who populate diaries do so because they have a direct connection with or influence on the diary keeper, especially a diary by a young girl.

[Critics often distinguish diaries from journals by the impersonality or distance the narrator has on his/her subject. Thus the "Diary" of Samuel Pepys (1660-1669) might more accurately be called his "Journal" because his account of London life is more reportage.] Billie Jo presents people as characters, rather than references as her own friends.

In order to fairly interpret the themes of the book, it makes some difference if we regard it as a diary or novel because the function of the narrator changes between the two forms.

In diaries, it is assumed that the narrator is the diary keeper and that whatever is entered is the impression of the author. There is no presumption that facts are presented to be facts but rather points of reference for establishing feelings. If the diary keeper says, "Sandy said such a cruel thing that it made me cry," we do not expect Sandy's remark to be regarded as a condition of cruelty, or even a point of fact, but merely the writer's response to something that was said. Conversely, if someone keeps a daily record of recipes or a log of t.v. programs watched, that is a journal or log.

Even though Billie Jo gives the appearance of keeping a diary, she falls into the circumstance of a fictional device called the "unreliable narrator," who gives the appearance of telling the truth but who, in fact, alters the reality of the situation for the purpose of allowing the reader to see through him/her. With humorous unreliable narrators like Huckleberry Finn, much of the humor is derived because Huck says he is doing one thing when we as readers we know he is about to do something else. "Unreliable" is not a negative critical term but one that simply identifies a narrator who may not be able to understand the full implications of what he/she says.

Billie Jo is such a narrator. When, for example, she states that her father left the bucket of kerosene by the stove, she implies that he did it on purpose. She doesn't tell us, or doesn't know why he would do such a thing, but she clearly sees it as an intentional act. She does not question his oversight (or evil intention) for leaving it there, but we readers are expected to do so. We are to look beyond what the unreliable narrator tells us to discover the truth. Anne Frank's diary is never written with such authorial intentions.

This makes Out of the Dust much richer as a novel than a diary; that Hesse presents it in diary format and poetic language compounds the layers of richness. Hesse invites us to probe Billie Jo's mind in a way a diary would not. If this were truly a diary, we would probably sympathize with Billie Jo and wish her well, but we would not be as compelled to understand her psychological complexity.

Another literary antecedent to Out of the Dust is episodic fiction, whose chapters do not have an apparent connection to each other. Certainly, in Out of the Dust there is cause and effect of some of the events, but there are many chapters which have no obvious connection to others, such as "Night Bloomer." Loosely, the ability of the cereus cactus to survive and produce a beautiful flower within the worst Dust Bowl conditions provides hope and fleeting beauty, but the chapter really has no connection to anything that happens, and had it been omitted, the reader never would have missed it. In tightly plotted novels, the omission of a chapter would render a section of the plot meaningless, whereas in episodic fiction many chapters (there are some crucial ones that cannot be left out) can be added or left out with little overall effect.

One of Hesse's most effective techniques is the use of poetry and poetic devices within the fictional structure.

The short sentences and truncated lines may give the appearance of a diary but their primary function is poetics. The "line" in poetry is structured to call attention to particular words or phrases that carry special significance, imagery, or sound. Take, for example, a stanza from the chapter "Blame."

The women talked as they scrubbed death from our house.

Stayed in my room silent on the iron bed, listening to their voices.

By breaking the first line after "they" and by placing "I" on a separate line, Hesse is focusing on how Billie Jo feels estranged from the people who are trying to help her. "They" are impersonal and serve as antagonists to Billie Jo. Hesse also places most of the verbs/adverbs (scrubbed, stayed, silent, listening) at the beginning of the lines and the nouns at the end (house, room, bed, voices). Look at the difference if the lines had been arranged as follows.

The women talked as they scrubbed death from our house. I stayed in my room, silent on the iron bed, listening to their voices.

Here, the women are much friendlier; the narrator is lonely but assured of some comfort. The women are talking to ward off the unpleasantness of scrubbing away death, and the narrator hears their voices in contrast to her silence. The iron bed is just a fixture in the room, not a cold, hard piece of furniture that, as a bed, should be comforting. Also, this rearranged stanza that is read more as a complete sentence than fragment, presents a narrator who is more rational—whose emotional condition may be more stable than the staccato narration that Billie Jo actually feels. In her use of line break to create emotion and insight into Billie Jo's mind, Hesse gives us another avenue to understanding themes.

Hesse also uses the traditional poetic devices of metaphor and symbol.

In the chapter "Something Lost, Something Gained," she applies direct metaphor (or simile) in comparing her mother to tumbleweed and her father to sod. Indirectly, she applies metaphor in her use of the cereus cactus that blooms valiantly at night, then dies with the morning light. Her mother was that flower, killed by light and heat, and her own life may be as well.

The difference between metaphor and symbol is that with metaphor there is a parallel between two objects, people, or ideas, whereas a symbol stands in place of an object, person, or idea. Sometimes metaphor and symbol work at the same time but on different levels. The cereus cactus works as both metaphor and symbol. Because this chapter comes not long after her mother's death, Billie Jo could not look at the cactus wither and die because that process reminded her of her mother's death; the petals would burn and wither in the sun as her mother's skin was burned and withered. But the cactus is also a symbol for perseverance and the night a symbol for a time of nourishment. In the dark hours a thing of incredible beauty blooms because it has survived; Billie Jo will, too.

Another example of Hesse's effective use of symbol occurs in the chapter "My Life, or What I told Louise After the Tenth Time She Came to Dinner," embodied in the lines: On the other shelf Ma's book of poetry remains.

And the invitation from Aunt Ellis, or what's left of it.

Daddy and I tore it into strips to mark the poems we thought Ma liked best.

Aunt Ellis had extended an invitation to Billie Jo after her mother's death to move to Lubbock and live there. It was a surefire way out of the Dust Bowl, but Billie Jo knew instantly that it wasn't an option that interested her. She put the letter on a shelf in case she ever changed her mind, or at least to remind her that she did have a choice. Once Billie Jo and her father reconciled to forgive and help each other, the letter was no longer necessary for Billie Jo's security, and so she began to shred it, not all at once in an epiphany of understanding, but piece by piece as she became more secure; that the two of them tore it into strips adds a second level of symbolic meaning as it illustrates their union; a third level is added in that the strips are used to mark the poems they thought Ma liked best. Symbolically, they are trying to get in touch with her now when in life they did not know which were her favorite poems.

In addition to her skill in drawing on both fictional and poetic devices, Hesse also draws upon the premise of Greek drama to make her story more horrifying. In his essay "The Poetics," which is perhaps the most influential work of criticism ever written, the Greek philosopher Aristotle outlined the components necessary for a successful drama. One of his criteria was that a noble person of high status, because of his own fault (usually arrogance), falls from grace to the lowest possible level he could descend, then finds the courage (usually through humility) to rise again. This is, in fact, the same premise as the story of Job, except that the moral lessons are different.

Billie Jo is indeed a noble figure who is, for her time and place, highly accomplished. She is the best eighth grade student in the entire state of the huge state of Oklahoma, and she is an accomplished musician. It is her fate that the bucket of kerosene is placed in her path. Through carelessness she causes her own downfall and is directly responsible for her mother catching on fire. She quickly descends, and after much agony in her lowly position learns compassion, then forgiveness, and is able to begin her ascent toward restoration. It doesn't matter whether the reader recognizes this classical premise of high drama, but its effect is powerful and works as surely in Out of the Dust as it does in Oedipus The King or King Lear. A similar component of traditional literary device is the presence of the "four elements": earth, air, fire, and water.

Whenever these forces combine against humankind, tragedy follows, and the power of "fate" becomes terrifying.

Themes

Leaving

One of the major themes of this book involves leaving or getting out of the dust bowl. Look at all the people who leave. Billie Jo's childhood friend, Livie Killian, moves away. The migrant workers, despite their seemingly desperate straits, are fortunate to move on. The family that moves into the schoolhouse eventually leaves. The wild boy who will work for food leaves and moves on.

Ma and Franklin don't leave in the same way, and they don't go voluntarily. Still, they leave, as do Haydon P. Nye and his wife, as well as Pete Guymon, who dies of dust pneumonia. Mad Dog leaves to sing on the radio. Billie Jo's thoughts are on getting out all the time. She is increasingly aware that there is a bigger world beyond Joyce City, a world with more to offer her artistic soul and with no dust.

When Billie Jo finally takes the leap and decides to leave, she figures out that the world outside of her sphere is not necessarily any better. In fact, it is worse. Leaving involves being alone in the world, and she hates that even more than the dust and the longing. She realizes her need for her father and his need for her are bigger than the need to leave. Leaving does not solve anything.

In fact, only when Billie Jo goes back, not just in body but also in spirit, does the healing begin. While her heart and mind are always on leaving, it is as if she were already gone in her heart. She uses her music to help her escape. When she goes back, it is with a free heart, and she is able to take pleasure in her music and her life once again.

Life/Birth versus Destruction

Life and birth versus destruction is one of the large universal themes of literature, and there are many examples in this book. Forces for destruction include the dust and wind, the volcano in Hawaii, erosion and the baking heat that kills the night-blooming flower. These forces are persistent and constant. It seems that the dust will never end.

Death is another force that destroys. Most obviously, Ma and Franklin's deaths affect Billie Jo and Daddy the most. There are also other deaths, and Billie Jo does not ignore them. She honors the lives of the people so they won't be forgotten. Fire of course is a huge destructive force, especially so in this novel. It takes Ma away and deforms Billie Jo's hands. There is also the fire on the train that leaves nothing but metal frames. Disease is a minor, but still destructive, element in the story. The main focus is on Daddy's spots, which turn out to be skin cancer. Humans are also a source of destruction. Miss Freeland clearly summarizes how man's actions have acted upon the land to contribute to the dust storms. In addition, humans act on each other in destructive ways, both physically and even more so emotionally.

As much as the destructive forces seem overwhelming and never ceasing, the symbols of life and birth are actually much more prevalent. For example, there are many babies born, including the Dionne quintuplets, Franklin, the baby born to the family in the schoolhouse and the baby left on the church steps. Even though Franklin dies, his birth cannot be discounted, because for however short a time, Billie Jo has a brother.

Other symbols of life include rain and snow. The rain is always welcomed and always physically enjoyed. When the big rain lasting for days comes, it brings with it new hope and new life. Water as a symbol of life is classic throughout literary history. After all, there is no life without water. The pond Daddy digs is a testament to his belief in life, no matter what tragedy he endures.

The apple trees symbolize renewal and diligence as well as new life. While the trees do not always do so well, they seem to always come back, renewed and ready for a new season of life. That seems to be the experience Billie Jo goes through as well. For a while the reader wonders if she will thrive, if she will survive, but then she taps into her own well of life and emerges renewed.

Music

Clearly, music is central to Billie Jo and her story. At first piano is a passion for her, and then it is a way out of this place. It is a comfort and an escape. After Ma dies, Billie Jo's journey inward is expressed outwardly in her musical struggles. Music is so much a part of her that when she can't play for herself, she goes to listen to Arley make his music.

The music competition is Billy Jo's moment. Even though she doesn't win first place, she proves to herself that she can still do it. She does something even bigger, though. She touches the hearts of the audience. Her love of music and beauty is communicated to them. All her feelings are communicated to them. The fact that her arms and hands ache so long afterward is a small price for such a connection with other people.

After that, though, her attempts are less successful, until her ultimate and utter failure to perform at the graduation ceremony. As the bitterness in her heart grows, she is less and less able to access her music. Only after she returns home with a forgiving heart is she able to free herself to the music once more.

Coming of Age

Coming of age novels are common in literature, and they serve an important function. They allow the reader, who may be experiencing similar emotional or physical traumas, to connect with the main character. Generally in a coming of age novel, the main character experiences some sort of traumatic catalytic moment. In the case of Billie Jo, this moment is the accident. It significantly changes the character's course in life, and the character must do some hard growing up in order to come out of the experience intact. Billie Jo's burned hands are a symbolic death, and through the painful process of healing, she is reborn.

Coming of age novels also take the character to a place where she has to learn to accept herself and others. Billie Jo finds this after she leaves and then returns home. Finally, there is usually a coming to terms with the reality that life can be very difficult and awful at times. Still, there is always hope and a way to cope. Other people can help. Clearly, Billie Jo goes through mourning for her Ma and brother and mourning for her own burned hands, but she comes out in the end learning to accept this reality, to see the silver lining and to love her Daddy despite his flaws. This means she can also love and accept herself despite her flaws.

Themes/Characters

There are so many themes that they best be lumped together as "the human heart in conflict with itself." The characters are easier to delineate. Fourteen year old Billie Jo Kelby is tall, lanky, and identifies with the color red. She was red when she came out of the womb and she has been red ever since: complexion, hair, identification with apples. She is her father's daughter through and through, and she doesn't especially like what she sees.

Her father, Bayard, is a one-dimensional prototype of the silent, dutiful husband who has little to say to anyone until the end of the story when he and Billie Jo recognize that if they are to survive they must put the past behind them, and the only way to accomplish that is to talk. Her mother Pol is better developed though still a prototype of the stoic, misplaced woman.

Billie Jo describes her as "not much to look at: long and skinny with poor teeth and dirty hair." Although her mother's past is not revealed, Billie Jo intimates that her mother never envisioned that she would wind up in this no man's land with a non-communicative husband. The only point of tenderness between Bayard and Pol is when Pol plays the piano; she is an accomplished musician and when they were younger, Bayard loved to stand behind her and listen to her music. He had, in fact, bought a piano as his wedding gift to her, and Billie Jo says that his eyes grew soft, standing behind her while she played. Billie Jo has inherited her mother's love of the piano, and has attained a level of achievement herself as a vivacious performer.

Various other minor characters populate the novel, and one, Aunt Ellis who lives in Lubbock, is important because she is the one sure escape Billie Jo has from Joyce City. Mad Dog Craddock, who was given his name because he bit everybody and everything in sight when he was two years old, is the only person to successfully escape the repressive world of the Dust Bowl; he is a singer of some talent, and he secures a job as a radio performer in Amarillo. Billie Jo, like Mad Dog, might have been able to escape as well had her hands not been badly burned.

The abundant themes are easily listed and more difficult to explicate.

Among them are the effects of the Depression on the human spirit; ambition; dreams; loss and gain; pain and guilt; forgiveness; nostalgia; compassion; responsibilities to others; courage; abandonment; acceptance of a step parent; and above all, death.

Billie Jo is accomplished: she is the top eighth grade student in the entire state of Oklahoma as determined by statewide tests, and she is an excellent entertainer with the piano, including musical arrangements and improvisations. She is confidant in her ability to perform and eager to take her talent public. Her mother is reluctant to allow Billie Jo to perform because, as Billie Jo analyzes it, "Maybe she's a little afraid of me going somewhere with the music she can't follow. Or of the music taking me so far away some day." Billie Jo clearly has a vision of life beyond the Dust Bowl, and the means to

achieve it. She says, And I think some day I'm going to walk there [California] too, through New Mexico and Arizona and Nevada.

Some day I'll leave behind the wind, and the dust and walk my way West and make myself to home in that distant place of green vines and promise.

Stoicism, or at least resignation, is almost a given condition for all the characters, but its virtues do constitute a minor theme. Billie Jo's mother has the most to be stoical about because she seems to have sacrificed the most. Bayard grew up on this land and would always be a part of it. Billie Jo, herself, is young and has the will and means to escape someday, but Pol finds herself at this end of the earth, married to an uncommunicative man, and at the mercy of nature. But in spite of her plight, she is resourceful and accepting of conditions beyond her control; she bears her life with grace and understanding.

Hesse takes a great leap of plotting and verisimilitude when she creates the terrible fire that burns Billie Jo and her mother, inextricably altering their lives; but having torched her characters, Hesse opens the way for the remainder of her many themes. Immediately, there is pain, both physical and the emotional anguish of what has happened. Billie Jo looks at her mother and says, I can't recognize her.

She smells like scorched meat. . .

It doesn't even have a face.

For most of the novel following the accident, Billie Jo describes the physical pain she feels in her hands, but most especially the emotional pain of losing the talent that would have provided her exodus from the Dust Bowl.

Her physical and emotional pain is real, not self-pity.

Once Billie Jo accepts the inevitability of her burned condition, the themes evolve to the questions of guilt, abandonment, and forgiveness.

Bayard not only placed the bucket of kerosene beside the stove, but he also appropriated the family's savings to finance his drunken night in the pub as his wife was dying. In this respect, Hesse comes close to making Bayard a villain. Although Hesse based the incident of the kerosene accident of a real event documented in an Oklahoma newspaper, from the perspective of fiction, it is inconceivable that a seasoned farmer like Bayard would have brought kerosene into the house, much less left an open bucket near flames, unless he had malevolent intentions. He never explains, or apologizes for this action. But even if readers are willing to believe that leaving an open bucket of kerosene, which has a strong odor and could never be mistaken for water, was an oversight, his blazon abandonment of responsibility to his dying wife was a heinous act that Billie Jo quite rightly cannot understand or forgive. Neither can the reader quite accept why Billie Jo does not accept some of the responsibility herself since it was she, after all, who started the fire. After the newborn baby has died and the village women

come to the house to help put things in order, Billie Jo tells us: The women talked as they scrubbed death from our house.

I Stayed in my room silent on the iron bed, listening to their voices.

"Billie Jo threw the pail," they said. "An accident," they said.

Under their words a finger pointed.

They didn't talk about my father leaving the kerosene by the stove.

They didn't say a word about my father drinking himself into a stupor while Ma writhed, begging for water.

They only said, Billie Jo threw the pail of kerosene.

Although Billie Jo is aware that other people hold her responsible, she does not accept her role and transfers her anger to her father. When she does begin to show signs of understanding him, she ruminates that she can "almost forgive him" for taking the money which he uses to get drunk, but that she can never forgive him for leaving the pail of kerosene by the stove. Why can't she unless she believes that he has intentionally attempted to maim and murder? The answer doesn't become clear until the end of the novel (in the chapter "Met") when they are walking together and she realizes that he has skin cancer which killed his father.

After the kerosene accident, Billie Jo's life is changed forever, and she realizes that she will never be able to escape her miserable life in the Dust Bowl through her piano entertainments. Nor in her heart does she believe, unlike her father, that the land will ever be restored to fecundity. He has destroyed her future and she can never forgive him for that. But as her anger and subconscious guilt turn to acceptance, and when she realizes that her rather may be subjecting himself to a slow, torturous death by cancer, perhaps as self punishment for his own guilt, she says I am forgiving him, step by step, for the pail of kerosene. As we walk together, side by side, in the sole-deep dust, I am forgiving myself for all the rest.

Forgiveness is seldom sincere and complete without compassion, which involves the process of self-absorption and identification with another being.

Hesse makes the reader feel compassion for the characters; we identify with Billie Jo's self image; the loss of her friend Livie Killian; her attempt to make the most of her harsh conditions.

She is a likeable character set in a time far removed from our own, and up to the point of the accident, we are cheering for her escape. After the accident we have great pity for her physical pain, loneliness, and isolation. [Hesse comes close to pushing the story into bathos (false pity) with the continuing dust storms, pestilence of locusts, short life of the cereus cactus, art show, second round of state tests, and Christmas dinner.] Hesse does not allow us at any point to falter in our compassion for Billie Jo. In contrast, Billie

Jo must learn compassion for others, especially her father, before she can reclaim her own life.

An important element to Billie Jo's acceptance of herself is symbolized by the condition of her hands, especially as they relate to her piano performances and escape from her life in the Dust Bowl. Page after page she explains the degree of her pain, and we have no reason to doubt her. As her mother was begging for water on her death bed, Billie Jo was unable to provide the life-giving sustenance that might have prolonged her death because her hands would not function properly. In a valiant effort to restore her musical future, Billie Jo performs in the local talent competition and wins third place, providing a glimmer of hope that she might be able to continue her career. But at the graduation ceremonies, she is unable to play at all, saying that it has been too long since she used her hands.

This is, perhaps, the lowest point of her life, where she feels completely defeated and unable to see her future.

As in all ancient Greek dramas, the Old Testament, and some modern drama (see Literary Qualities below), characters cannot begin their ascent to redemption until they have completely hit bottom. When Billie Jo learns from the doctor that her hands can be healed through the simple remedies of creams and exercise, we are distressed that Billie Jo has been deprived of this information for so long by her father's refusal to see a doctor.

But this medical information also places into question Billie Jo's reliability as a narrator explaining her physical pain. It is possible that after the initial burns had healed Billie Jo was emotionally unable to gain control of her hands; in fact, if the doctor's diagnosis is correct and Billie Jo had been exercising her hands rather than refusing to force herself to play the piano, she might have recovered the use of them. By not using her hands to play the piano, she was honoring her mother's reluctance to give Billie Jo permission to follow a musical path. Before the accident she was eager to perform regardless of her mother's wishes; her refusal to play the piano afterwards provides an important insight into her emotional condition.

Abandonment is central to the novel's themes, and it appears in many forms. Most obvious is Bayard's abandonment of his wife (and daughter) to go drinking on the night of her death.

The only reason Billie Jo forgives her father of this at the end of the novel is because she has learned the compassion to know that he, too, was in great pain because of the accident; he certainly knew that his wife was dying and could not bear the burden of her agony. Understandably, Billie Jo feels abandoned by her mother, which she exemplifies in her wish to adopt the abandoned baby in the chapter "Baby."

Her poignant vision of the Lindbergh baby stiff and dead in the woods and her donation of clothes and the dimes her mother had saved for her piano education, reveal the

depth of Billie Jo's feelings of abandonment. Billie Jo's father and the other farmers also feel abandoned by nature, which suggests a central idea: Job.

In the Old Testament, Job was a prosperous, pious man whose devotion God decided to test by stripping him of all his Earthly joys. First, God destroyed Job's wealth, then his livestock and the fecundity of the land to produce crops, and finally God killed his wife and children. At each disaster, Job refused to blame God for his misfortune until, at his lowest point, when any other man would have been broken—at which time most other men would have cursed such a malevolent God—Job reaffirms his faith and God rewards him by restoring good things to his life. Similarly, Bayard loses everything: crops, wife, new son, but he does not ever blame God. [Strangely, God is never mentioned by anyone in the novel, which is odd in a southern rural community during the 1930s.] Bayard, who is the Job figure, continues to have faith that his land will be restored, and in this respect does not abandon God even though God may seem to have abandoned the land.

Readers may well ask why Billie Jo isn't the Job figure. She certainly suffers, even more than her father who hasn't been burned. She has sacrificed more than him because she has lost not only her mother and brother, but all hope of escape from her plight in the Dust Bowl. Her father's future was already determined but she had her whole life ahead of her. And when she is reduced to total despair, she is more despondent and broken than her father at his lowest ebb. The difference between them as archetypal figures is that Bayard is truly the Job figure. We know nothing about his emotions as narrated by Billie Jo; he displays little emotion at the loss of his crops and family; he is never broken by the misfortune heaped upon him; and he never whimpers or transfers blame to anything else. He does not cry out against his fate.

Billie Jo, on the other hand, is a New Testament figure, a modern rather than ancient hero. In one of the most famous passages in modern literature, Ernest Hemingway wrote that if you are too strong, the world will break you but that afterwards, you will be stronger in the broken places. Billie Jo has been tested and tested; the world has been relentless in its attempt to break this strong young women, and it finally succeeds, but Billie Jo has ultimately gotten the best of her assailant because she has rebounded in the broken places by forgiving her father, accepting his fiancee, encouraging his renewed start in life, and believing that with creams and exercise, she may play the piano again.

All of the themes are emotional or spiritual except one, the Great Depression, which is social. Throughout, there is support for the government and justifiable belief that the government will help the people. Billie Jo is honored to play for the Franklin D. Roosevelt benefit; she names her dead brother Franklin in honor of the President; the government sends ample food aid to the school program; and on several occasions, it is made clear that the government is providing loans to farmers with no obligation that they will be able to repay them. Only if the crops prosper and the farmers are able to get back on their feet will the loans be repaid. This view of the government as benevolent father figure pervaded social consciousness in the U.S.

until well after World War II.

Readers may ask if physical impairment is a theme. During the 1980s and 1990s in the U.S., much social attention was rendered to the subject of "handicap" rights. The return of maimed Viet Nam veterans brought the issue to prominent attention, which ultimately produced legislation (The Americans with Disabilities Act) to protect the rights of the physically impaired. The thrust of the debate and final legislation was the recognition that American society had long denied the rights and capabilities of physically impaired people to lead a normal life within their limitations. As a small example but important symbol, wheel chair ramps were not provided for most buildings. In Out of the Dust Billie Jo is greatly impaired but there is no discrimination against her because of her handicap. Indeed, the community tries to help her by encouraging her to perform in the talent competition and awarding her third place. There is no stigma attached to her physical impairment, and people do not seem to be embarrassed by it, even though Billie Jo is. If there is any social inference to be drawn, it is that medical attention was not readily available.

Billie Jo's father was not willing to spend the money to take her to a doc4836 Out of the Dust tor, but this is probably more of Hesse's attempt to characterize him than to provide social commentary.

During the Depression, doctors, lawyers, and other professionals usually provided their services for free to needy recipients, and the doctor in Out of the Dust appears to be of this mold.

Style

Point of View

Out of the Dust is told in first person from the point of view of Billie Jo. This seems the logical choice. Imagine having the story told from another point of view or in third person. It just doesn't fit. This story is Billie Jo's and hers alone to tell. That's because it is not just about the dust bowl and how a family lives through it. It is, indeed, the story of how the dust bowl affects her. It is her story of how Ma and Franklin's deaths affect her and how having her hands burned affects her. It is the story, after all, of how she finds the authentic spirit inside herself.

Another reason first person works for this story is that it is intended to be a novel for young readers. The main character is thirteen and fourteen in the book, and the first person perspective takes the reader right into her thoughts and feelings. This allows the readers to connect more intimately with Billie Jo and lets them see the story in a way that relates to them.

Setting

The setting of the story is the Oklahoma Panhandle, in the town of Joyce City, during the dust bowl era of the early thirties. It plays an important role in the story. Because the dust is so prevalent and plays such as huge role in Billie Jo's desire to get out, the setting is ultimately necessary to the plot.

Farmers here, Daddy most importantly, are tied to the land. Even though they have to take government help to get through the drought, they have confidence that the land will bring forth the wheat eventually. The setting contributes to the consciousness of the people, taking them on a roller coaster ride of hope and despair. They always hope that things will end up well and that hope will win over despair.

Because of the isolated setting, community is important. Although many of the characters in the story are not necessarily that important to Billie Jo, they form part of her milieu, part of the world that she inhabits. If Billie Jo lived in a larger town or a city even, it's possible her drive to get out would not be as great, because her opportunities for self-expression would be more numerous. Her setting and her home drives much of her motivation.

Language and Meaning

On the surface, this book seems to be very simple. While the poetic form might at first glance be hard to read, these poems read like prose. Billie Jo's voice is clear and simple. At the same time, she expresses things with an observant eye and an artistic choice of words. The simple language reflects the simplicity of the life and times. Joyce

City is made up of farmers, shop owners, a teacher and basic, ordinary people, so the ordinary language suits the characters and plot.

Many of the poems are about the constant dust storms. The author uses this repetition to help the reader experience the relentless pounding of the dust, which allows us to share the experience with Billie Jo. When the poems with rain come, the reader also hopes that this will be an end to the dust.

Structure

This novel is in poetic form, which was quite popular in children's novels at the time it was published. It suits this story because Billie Jo is a person with artistic sensibilities. Poetry is a natural way for her voice to come out. Each section is organized according to the season and the year. This structure serves to remind the reader of the cycles of life and death, rebirth, struggle and ease. Billie Jo's story is part of the cycles of her life.

The poetic form lends itself to a more intimate experience of the main character's emotional state. Since this really is an interior story, in other words a story of her inner life, poetry allows the readers to feel as if we are reading her own inner thoughts and feelings. The emphasis with poetry is on feelings, thoughts, and impressions of the events in the plot, so there is much that is not said but is implied or must be filled in by the readers. We are not necessarily told each and every piece of information about the specific events, although sometimes we do get a narrative tone. Most of the time, when Billie Jo speaks in this narrative way, it's because her emotions run so deep. It's as if she has to hide them under the veneer of narration so that they don't explode and cause her more pain.

Quotes

"Now Livie's gone west,/out of the dust,/on her way to California,/where the wind takes a rest sometimes./ And I'm wondering what kind of friend I am,/wanting my feet on that road to another place,/instead of Livie's." Winter 1934, page 9

"Darn that blue-eyed boy/with his fine face and his/smooth voice,/twice as good/as a plowboy has any right to be." Winter 1934, page 11

"When I point my fingers at the keys,/the music/springs straight out of me./Right hand/playing notes sharp as/tongues,/telling stories while the/smooth/buttery rhythms back me up/on the left." Winter 1934, page 13

"Daddy bought it, an old Cramer,/his wedding gift to her./She came to this house and found gaps in the walls,/a rusty bed, no running water,/and that piano,/gleaming in the corner." Winter 1934, page 24

"The piano is some comfort in all this./I go to it and forget the dust for hours,/testing my long fingers on wild rhythms" Spring 1934, page 39

"How does that /singing plowboy know something I don't?/And how much more is out there/most everyone else has heard of/except me?" Spring 1934, page 42

"My place in the world is at the piano." Spring 1934, page 49

"My dazzling ma, round and ripe and striped/like a melon." Summer 1934, page 56

"I cleaned off the keys/but when I played,/a tortured sound came from the piano,/like someone shrieking." Summer 1934, page 63-64

"Under their words a finger pointed." Summer 1934, page 71

"I come up quiet/and sit behind Arley Wanderdale's house,/where no one can see me, and lean my head back,/and close my eyes,/and listen to Arley play." Summer 1934, page 74

"It blossomed at night,/when the sun couldn't scorch it,/when the wind was quiet,/when there might have been a sip of dew/to freshen it." Summer 1934, page 81-82

"But now the exhibit is gone,/the paintings/stored away in spare rooms/or locked up/where no one can see them./I feel such a hunger/to see such things./And such an anger/because I can't." Autumn 1934, page 95

"My father loved Ma's special cranberry sauce./But she never showed me how to make it." Winter 1935, page 101

"but every day/my fingers and hands/ache so bad. I think/I should just let them rest,/let the dust rest,/let the world rest./But I can't leave it rest,/on account of Ma,/haunting." Winter 1935, page 110

"And yet, if I could look in the mirror and see her in/my face./If I could somehow know that Ma/and baby Franklin/lived on in me..." Winter 1935, page 114

"Most of the night I think I smiled./And twice my father laughed./Imagine." Winter 1935, page 116

"These kids,/Sheriff Robertson said,/ought to have something sweet to/wash down their dusty milk./And so we did." Winter 1934, page 126

"My fingers leave sighs/in the dust." Winter 1935, page 139

"Brown earth rained down from the sky." Winter 1935, page 143

"I think we're both turning to dust." Spring 1935, page 175

"I tried cheering for Mad Dog with everyone else,/but my throat/felt like a trap had/snapped down on it." Spring 1935, page 183

"I am thinking/that a dinosaur is getting out of Joyce City/a hundred million years too late to/appreciate the trip," Spring 1935, page 188

"Piano, my silent/mother,/I can touch you,/you are cool/and smooth/and willing/to stay with me/stay with me/talk to me." Summer 1935, page 193

"My father was more like the sod./Steady, silent, and deep./Holding on to life, with reserves underneath/to sustain him, and me,/and anyone else who came near." Summer 1935, page 202

"And what I like best about her,/is Louise doesn't say what I should do./She just nods,/And I know she's heard everything I said,/and some things I didn't say too." Autumn 1935, page 219

"And I know now that all the time I was trying to get/out of the dust,/the fact is,/what I am,/I am because of the dust./And what I am is good enough./Even for me." Autumn 1935, page 222

Topics for Discussion

1. There are some elements in this story that seem a little farfetched, such as Billie Jo's being the top eighth grade student in Oklahoma and her father carelessly leaving kerosene by the stove. Was it necessary to have stretched credibility this far? Couldn't Billie Jo simply have been the top student in her school, and couldn't the fire have started another way to create the same effect?

2. Novels always have a turning point, when the plight of the main character changes direction. Most novels have a major and a minor turning point (called "climax" and anticlimax"). What are they in Out of the Dust? Is it when the good rains come, or when Billie Jo wins third place in the competition, or when she cannot perform at graduation, or when the government sends food aide? Or other events?

3. The chapter entitled "Dust Storm" embodies many of the novel's themes.

What are they?

4. In the chapter "Dust Storm" Billie Jo says that she finds her way by walking along the edge. How does this become a symbol for how she deals with her life?

5. There are several chapters that border on becoming too sentimental.

What are they? How does sentimentality undermine true emotions.

6. Why does Pa dig a gigantic hole?

What does it symbolize?

7. What do Ma's apple trees symbolize?

8. The grasshoppers attack what little remains of the vegetation, and the apple trees are completely eaten.

What does this event symbolize? Why does it occur when it does? What are the biblical occurrences in which locusts plague a people.

9. What is the function of the homeless family moving into the school house?

10. Is the ending too contrived or sentimental? Is it plausible that Bayard would attend school with mostly women, find an eligible woman in the guise of the teacher who is far more educated and attractive than he, and be able to win her affections? Why would she be interested in him.

Essay Topics

How is the dust in this novel as much a character as the people in the novel?

Do you think that being burned so badly is part of the reason Ma dies, or do you think she would have died in childbirth anyway?

Many topics and objects in this book are symbolic. Do any of them seem to symbolize the same or similar ideas?

Why does Billie Jo start calling Daddy "my father" after Ma dies?

Why do you think Billie Jo doesn't leave her home sooner? Why do you think she finally leaves home when she does?

Do you think when she returns that she is settling or do you think she is making the right choice for her? Explain.

Setting is extremely important in this story. Discuss why and how it influences the story.

In what ways is Ma still present, perhaps even more present, after she dies?

Describe the emotional journey Billie Jo takes in this novel, and discuss how it fits into the category called coming of age novel.

How does using poetic form make sense for this novel?

Discuss why you think the author chooses to tell this story in first person from Billie Jo's point of view.

Even though the main character is a young girl, do you think the book is meant for kids or for adults? Explain.

Compare this book with other novels about characters who want to get out, who feel trapped by circumstances or who have dreams of artistic expression.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the period in American history from 1930-1936 in Oklahoma and Texas and describe the conditions of the farmers.

2. Research the means that the federal government used to help people recover from the Depression, especially through banks and farm subsidies.

3. Some of the programs that were established to help Depression Era farmers recover are still in effect today. What are they? Is it necessary to keep them in a time so different from the Depression?

4. Compare conditions described in Out of the Dust with the conditions in other Depression Era novels, such as The Grapes of Wrath and To Kill a Mockingbird.

5. Research the types and degrees of burns that people receive. Discuss what kind of burn Billie Jo had.

6. Read "The Book of Job" in the Old Testament and discuss what aspects of that story are used in Out of the Dust.

7. Read the myth of the rising phoenix and discuss if it has any relevance to Out of the Dust.

8. Compare Out of the Dust with a Greek drama?

Further Study

Hesse, Karen. In Something About the Author. Volume 74. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994, pp. 120-121. Short entry with some biographical and publication data, and a "sidelight" from Hesse explaining some of the early influences on her writing.

Hesse, Karen. Something About the Author: Juvenile Writers Autobiography Series. Volume 25. Detroit: Gale Research, 1998, pp. 117-138. Hesse writes warmly and intimately about growing up in Baltimore, attending college, working, marrying and having children, and writing books.

Horn Book 169 (1998). The reviewer says of Out of the Dust, "In first-person free-verse poems fourteenyear- old Billie Jo Kelby relates her Depression-era experiences in the Oklahoma panhandle. Billie Jo's aborted escape from the dust bowl almost gets lost in a procession of bleak events, instead of serving as the book's climax. Yet her voice, nearly every word informed by longing, provides an immediacy that expressively depicts both a grim historical era and one family's healing.

Horn Book 169 (1994). The reviewer says of Phoenix Rising, "The chilling aftereffects of a nuclear accident are explored in this grim, moving novel set in rural Vermont. Nyle and her grandmother take two refugees from the area near to the power plant into their home, and Nyle, whose own mother and grandfather are dead, slowly allows herself to befriend and come to love the fifteen-year-old boy, who is suffering from radiation sickness."

Kirkus Reviews. (September 15, 1997).

The reviewer says of Out of the Dust that "The poem/novel ends with only a trace of hope; there are no pat endings, but a glimpse of beauty wrought from brutal reality."

Kirkus Reviews. (August 15, 1996).

Reviewer says of The Music of Dolphins, "As someone whose inner resilience has allowed her to develop a dual nature, Mila is utterly convincing; in a highly individual voice, she describes her old and new lives—e.g., 'the sea is a big home where all the time is swimming and all the time is singing and all the time is touching in the big wet.'

Changes in type size and style signal Mila's inner shifts as she turns toward humanity, then away, finding in the dolphins a wiser, more comfortable society. A probing look at what makes us human, with an unforgettable protagonist."

Lempke, Susan Dove. Review. Booklist (December 1, 1995). Lempke says of A Time of Angels, "Hesse's meticu lous re-creation of time and place (substantiated by an author's note) gets the novel off to a very slow start but lends an authentic feel to the story, despite some incidents that seem added merely for historical flavor. Her characters are

also richly drawn, especially Klaus and Vashti, and there's a ring of truth to Hannah's being torn between her life in Vermont and her life in the city."

Monks, Merri. Review. Booklist (May 15, 1995). Monks says of Phoenix Rising, "Hesse introduces important issues—environmental disaster, friendship, first love, loss, and death—in a novel that is reasonably accessible; however, the book will require effort from its intended audience, as its focus is on character growth and development, and the plot moves rather slowly."

O'Malley, Anne. Review. Booklist (October 15, 1996). O'Malley says that The Music of Dolphins works largely because of Mila's sharp observations, the stranger-in-a-strange-land scenario, and the incredible notion of the dolphin family, all of which will interest elementary and middle-school readers.

Related Titles

Hesse's A Time of Angels (1995) relates to Out of the Dust in a number of ways, and contains similar themes.

Fourteen year old Hannah Gold and her two sisters are separated from their Jewish parents in 1918 at the end of World War I, and move in with their aunt, Tanta Rose and her friend Vashti, in a tenement apartment in Boston's West End. Hannah sells newspapers to help with the finances, but despite her good intentions, Vashti resents having children underfoot. When a deadly influenza strikes the family and kills Tanta Rose, Hannah escapes to Vermont, where she makes a slow recovery, cared for by an old farmer named Klaus Gerhart, whose German heritage has made him suspect in the town. In the process, she learns how to deal with death, prejudice, forgiveness, and healing. As with Out of the Dust, each chapter is dated, beginning Tuesday, September 10,1918 and ending Wednesday, November 13, 1918.

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