

The Year of Billy Miller Study Guide

The Year of Billy Miller by Kevin Henkes

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Plot Summary

“The Year of Billy Miller” is a children’s novel by Kevin Henkes which follows the life of 7-year-old Billy Miller through his second-grade year at Georgia O’Keefe Elementary School in Constant, Wisconsin. When the novel begins, Billy is worried that he will not be smart enough for second grade, because at the end of the summer, on a road trip, he fell from an observation platform and hit his head, leaving a large lump, which ultimately goes away. Billy’s father, Papa, tells Billy that he will be fine, and drawing on a summer letter from the woman who will become Billy’s second grade teacher, Mrs. Silver, in which she mentions the Chinese Year of the Rabbit, Papa explains that this year will actually be the Year of Billy Miller.

The Year of Billy Miller turns out to be exceptional for being relatively unexceptional, though deeply touching. Billy must contend with a bossy girl at school, Emma Sparks, and must handle his annoying sister, Sal, at home. He must convince Mrs. Silver that he is a nice boy, for he worries that she thinks he is mean, and must write a poem about, and in dedication to, his mother, at the end of the school year. Billy plans to stay up all night at one point, but fails to do so, and only scares himself after letting his imagination run wild. At one point, Papa and Billy must salvage Billy’s bat cave diorama after Sal unthinkingly adds glitter to it.

Yet, through it all, Billy manages to grow and learn from those around him, and to influence them as well. By the end of the novel, Billy has become more appreciative of his sister, even giving her his approval by writing that she is “okay”. Billy inspires Papa to begin a new form of art, which proves to be his breakthrough. Mama, in turn, inspires Billy to understand the world in a different way through appreciation for quietness in the world. Billy even comes to figure out how to deal with Emma, and that is to simply ignore her. In the end, what makes the Year of Billy Miller so exceptional is that it is unexceptional, except to Billy, whose life seems better and fuller in the end.

Part 1, Chapters 1 – 3

Summary

Part 1, Chapter 1 – 7-year-old Billy Miller is nervous about his first day of second grade because he doesn't believe he will be smart enough. Two weeks before, on the way home from Mount Rushmore in the Black Hills of South Dakota, Billy and his family stop in Blue Earth, Minnesota, to see the Jolly Green Giant statue. It is very windy, and while standing on the lookout platform, the wind takes Billy's new Black Hills baseball cap. Billy lunges for it, falls over the guardrail, and falls on his head. Billy wakes up in the hospital, and the doctor tells his parents and three year-old sister Sally (Sal) that Billy is unharmed. Billy's father, Papa, even manages to get Billy's hat back. Back home, Billy shoes the bump on his head proudly to his best friend, Ned. But Billy overhears his parents talking, and his mother, Mama, saying she is worried that Billy will become forgetful sooner or later, or that he'll become confused at school. Billy's father isn't worried, and believes Billy will be okay. On the first day of second grade, both of Billy's parents wish him a happy first day, and Billy notes that his parents often say the same thing as the other.

Billy's mother is a high school English teacher. Billy's father is a stay-at-home dad who aspires to being a breakthrough artist, being a found-object sculptor. Billy loves to watch his father work. While Billy eats his breakfast, his father reads aloud the introductory letter Mrs. Silver, the second grade teacher, sent out over the summer. The letter explains Mrs. Silver has a husband, a baby boy, two dogs, and promises that second grade will be a fun and rewarding challenge. Billy doesn't like the idea of challenges. The letter concludes by saying it is the Chinese Year of the Rabbit. Billy asks his father if he'll be smart enough for second grade, and his father lovingly reassures Billy, telling him yes. He says that it might be the Year of the Rabbit for Mrs. Silver and the Chinese, but he knows it is really the Year of Billy Miller.

Part 1, Chapter 2 – Billy anxiously waits for his father and Sal by the front door. Sal is in the bathroom, but blames taking so long it on the Drop Sisters – a pillowcase full of stuffed whales named Raindrop, Dewdrop, Snowdrop, Gumdrop, and Lemondrop. Raindrop is the oldest, and the others were all replacements purchased by Sal's parents and relatives in case Raindrop ever got lost, until Sal found them and adopted them immediately. Billy, Sal, and their father then head out by foot toward Georgia O'Keeffe Elementary School in Constant, Wisconsin. They meet up with Ned, and his mother, Amy, along the way. Both parents jokingly say they'll trail at a safe distance so the boys aren't embarrassed. At the school, the principal, Mr. Tuttle, uses a megaphone to welcome everyone back to school. The students then go to class. Billy and Ned go to Room 2.

Part 1, Chapter 3 – Mrs. Silver has blonde hair in a bun with two red chopsticks in it. She tells the students to take their seats according to where their names appear on tags. Ned insists Billy sit next to him, but Emma Sparks tells Billy he is in her seat. Billy



moves over a seat, and sits where he is supposed to, next to a shy girl named Grace Cotter. Emma tells the other three they can call her “Emster”, which is her nickname. Emma reminds Billy of an adult. He mishears her name, and calls her “Hamster”, which causes everyone to laugh.

Mrs. Silver brings the class to attention by ringing a gong. The students are told to introduce themselves, saying their name and something about themselves. Billy Miller introduces himself, and says he is in second grade. Everyone giggles, except Emma, who calls Billy dumb. When they are writing and drawing in their journals later, Emma tells Billy to write down that he is in second grade so he doesn’t forget, and Billy takes two red markers, holds them up like devil horns to his head, and makes a mean face at Emma. This is seen by Mrs. Silver, who frowns at Billy. Billy then realizes Mrs. Silver must have thought he was making fun of her. Billy then decides to draw a picture of a hamster, and writes “Hamsters smell bad” underneath.

Analysis

“The Year of Billy Miller” is a children’s novel by Kevin Henkes, which revolves around nearly a year in the life of 7-year-old Billy Miller. Billy is an average 7-year-old kid, whose parents are loving and whose little sister is annoying. When the novel begins, Billy is worried about second grade, and the start of the school year. He worries that an accident over the summer – where he fell from a lookout platform, and bumped his head – will mean he is not as smart, or not able to remember things like his friends and classmates can. Billy’s parents are kind and loving, and it is his father who explains in the first chapter that China might be celebrating the Year of the Rabbit, but it will instead be the Year of Billy Miller. What will make the coming year the Year of Billy Miller is as of yet unknown, but Billy likes the sound of it.

While much of Billy’s life does indeed seem average – he has loving parents, an annoying little sister, a safe place to call home, and a best friend – there are some unusual things about him as well. The way in which he receives his injury is unusual – for not many people fall off the lookout platform at the state of the Jolly Green Giant. When the novel begins, Billy’s father is a struggling artist who appears to be more of a stay-at-home dad than an artist actually working from home (though this will change in future chapters). While many schools are named after presidents or public officials, Billy’s school is named after an artist, Georgia O’Keeffe. And Mrs. Silver, the second grade teacher, has a love of Chinese culture and history which she brings into her classroom whenever she can. This helps give the students in her class a broader perspective and understanding of the world, and a deeper appreciation for their own home as well.

While Billy is nervous about being smart enough to begin school, his two major problems ultimately have nothing to do with his intelligence or his abilities to remember what is being taught. The first problem Billy faces is in the form of bossy, know-it-all Emma Sparks. Billy compares Emma to an adult for all that she knows, and the way she handles herself. Emma presents an ongoing problem for Billy, one which is not resolved



in Part 1. The second problem that Billy faces in Part 1, wherein he worries that Mrs. Silver does not think he is nice or kind, becomes apparent when he believes she has mistaken his devilish face toward Emma as a mockery of the red chopsticks that Mrs. Silver wears in her hair. Unlike the issue with Emma, the issue with Mrs. Silver will be resolved in the coming chapters of Part 1.

Discussion Question 1

When the novel begins, Billy is worried about beginning second grade. Why is this? Does Billy have reason to worry, as it turns out? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What is Billy Miller's family like? In what ways are they like a stereotypical American family? In what ways do they do things a little differently?

Discussion Question 3

What proves to be the biggest problem Billy faces so far? Why?

Vocabulary

instantly, spectacular, blustery, miraculously, incident, challenge, flourish, grungy, embarrass, resonant



Part 1, Chapters 4 – 5

Summary

Part 1, Chapter 4 – Sal is waiting for Billy when he gets home. So is Papa, who is carrying an old, beat-up cello with two strings. He asks about Billy's day, and he tells his father about Hamster. When Papa asks about Mrs. Silver, Billy says he doesn't want to talk anymore. Sal says she has learned to read with Papa, and holds up a copy of "Pride and Prejudice", Mama's favorite book. She says she now knows how to read the words and it is thanks to Papa. She says she is going to reach the Drop Sisters how to read.

Papa then brings both of his children to the garage to show them the treasures he has found that day at the dump, in addition to the cello. These include an old-fashioned telephone, driftwood, and a shiny silver garden ball with a cement pedestal. Papa asks Billy if any of the objects speaks to him as potential art. Papa jokingly uses the silver garden ball as a crystal ball to predict the future, and Billy thinks that he would like to see Emma moved to a different seat in the near future, and to know that Mrs. Silver is not mad at him. Sal is thrilled with the silver ball. Billy likes the phone best, and suggests taking it apart, because he loves how things work on the inside. Sal thinks Billy should like the silver ball, so he could give it to Mrs. Silver, which would make him her favorite. It gives Billy an idea. When Ned comes over, he and Billy take the phone apart with Papa. By the time Billy goes to bed, he has a plan.

Part 1, Chapter 5 – Billy decides to give Mrs. Silver a gift of silver-colored items, including a nickel, a dime, a quarter, a paper clip, a safety pin, a nail, and a silver rabbit, one of three silver animals from Mama's childhood that she has put on Billy's desk. Billy believes the gifts to Mrs. Silver will show her he is a nice person. It is a foggy morning. Ned and Billy hope they get lost so they don't have to go to school, but end up at school anyways. Emma tells Billy not to forget he is in second grade, so Billy and Ned chase after her, shouting that a Hamster is on the loose. They then play on the playground until it is time for class.

In class, Billy considers how he should give the gifts to Mrs. Silver, while Mrs. Silver is teaching a lesson about habitats. She goes around showing everyone a robin's nest. The students are then told to draw the habitat they would live in if they were animals. Ned wants to live under the sea, Emma wants to live as a royal mouse in a castle, and Grace draws an amazing spider's web. Billy scribbles all over his page and labels it as a bat habitat, the inside of a cave. When everyone goes out to recess, Billy gives Mrs. Silver the gifts. Mrs. Silver thanks him, and tells Billy she can tell he is really nice, which makes Billy happy. Mrs. Silver asks about the rabbit, which Billy explains used to be his mom's. She kindly returns the coins and the rabbit, but keeps the paper clip, safety pin, and nail. He asks Mrs. Silver if she thinks he is smart enough for second grade, and she replies that he is. Billy tells her he likes her chopsticks, and then runs out to play. Billy is very happy as he meets up with Ned.



Analysis

The other problem Billy faces in Part 1 is that he is worried that Mrs. Silver does not like him, and does not think he is nice. He attempts to correct this problem by giving her some silver-colored gifts, such as a paperclip and a nail – which Mrs. Silver kindly accepts. Billy believes the act of gift-giving makes Mrs. Silver believe that he is nice, but the reader is able to determine that simply the thought behind the act – Billy's careful consideration not only of giving gifts, but what he wants to give her – speaks to his gentle and compassionate nature, which is recognized by Mrs. Silver. While the issue with Mrs. Silver is resolved, it becomes apparent that Emma's snide remarks toward Billy are only beginning, and will only continue, rather than end in something like friendship. This is very clear when Emma takes great care to insultingly remind Billy that he is in second grade. Billy manages to get through this particular incident with the loyalty of Ned.

As Billy shifts from one problem to the next, it is apparent that his father is also experiencing something of a problem. Though Papa is a stay-at-home dad, he is not merely doing housework and taking care of the kids. He is actively seeking for a breakthrough as an artist. A found-object sculptor, he collects various objects that have been thrown away to reassemble them in a new form. The process of collecting such objects is made clear in Chapter 4 of Part 1, where Papa has found an old cello, and some other objects, such as a silver garden ball. Interestingly enough, the silver ball, and a comment by Sal, proves to be the catalyst for Billy's silver gift idea; and the cello that Papa has collected for use in art will come to play a prominent role in the fourth part of the novel.

As the novel unfolds through the rest of the first part, one of the more particular themes becomes apparent – that of ideas. Billy will either become the generator of, or recipient of, ideas, all of which will positively impact his life or the lives of those around him. Without giving her credit for it, Sal's suggestion – at once so simple and so brilliant to Billy – that Billy give Mrs. Silver a silver ball so he will be her favorite inspires Billy to give Mrs. Silver silver-colored gifts, which ultimately works out for the best.

Discussion Question 1

How does Billy attempt to handle the concern he has that Mrs. Silver doesn't like him? How does she respond? Why?

Discussion Question 2

What problem does Billy's father seem to be experiencing? Why?



Discussion Question 3

How does the theme of ideas begin in this section of the novel? Who presents this first idea? How does it inspire Billy?

Vocabulary

dilapidated, rummage, mesmerized, distorted, internal, gesture, murkiness, intricate, inclined



Part 2

Summary

Part 2, Chapter 1 – The autumn comes on, and it seems as if Papa is crabby all the time. Billy asks his mother why this is the case. Mama explains that he is having difficulty with his work. Sal asks what a breakthrough is, and Mama explains that a breakthrough is when things click, when work goes well. Mama asks Billy to go and get Papa, because it is time to eat breakfast. Papa has been working on a cello with four mannequin arms attached to it. Papa asks Billy what he thinks, and Billy describes it as if the cello is playing itself, or is a spider. Billy suggests adding a monster mask, but Papa says “Whatever” sharply, and then heads in to eat. After breakfast, Billy reminds Papa that Ned is coming over, and they are going to work on habitat dioramas with Papa’s help. Billy is making a cave, and Ned is making the sea. Sal says she wants to make a diorama, too, for the Drop Sisters.

Part 2, Chapter 2 – Mama gives up three shoeboxes to Billy, Ned, and Sal for dioramas. When work begins, Papa is in a good mood. Billy is excited to be working hard, but has difficulty making bats. Papa makes a bat for him, and Billy is proud of the diorama – until he sees how well Ned’s, and even Sal’s dioramas, have turned out. Ned jokingly refers to Billy’s bat as a pair of flying underwear, to which Billy replies that Ned’s diorama only looks good because he used store-bought sharks, and that Sal’s diorama only doesn’t look like garbage because Papa helped her. Papa raises his voice and tells Billy that is enough. Papa leaves, and Mama comes in to help clean up.

Part 2, Chapter 3 – As the day goes on, Billy feels better about his diorama, because the bat looks like it is flying, and can wiggle. When Papa tucks Billy into bed, Billy suggests that Papa make a diorama for art, since he is so good at it. He suggests Papa use the old cigar boxes he has. Papa finds this interesting, kisses Billy on the head, and then says good night. The next morning, Papa is in a very good mood. Mama has gone to school early to help a student, and Billy can’t wait to get to school to see what Mrs. Silver thinks of his bat and cave diorama. Billy suddenly sees Sal shaking glitter from her diorama into Billy’s. She tells him she is giving him fairies. Billy is enraged, because the diorama looks like a girl did it. Papa is reassuring, however. He uses a hairdryer to help remove the glitter. Though it doesn’t all come out, Papa explains that rock is composed of minerals, like mica, which make rock sparkle. Because of that, the diorama is more authentic. Papa then drives Billy to school, narrowly avoiding being late. Billy shouts “Thank you, Papa!” as he heads into school, and is overheard by Emma. Emma calls Billy babyish for using the word “Papa”. It makes Billy unhappy.

Part 2, Chapter 4 – The students in Mrs. Silver’s class present their dioramas, one by one. Billy explains his diorama, right down to the glitter and mica. Mrs. Silver says the glitter is a nice touch. Emma whispers to Billy, asking if the big bat is the “Papa bat”. Billy wishes he was a bat so he could bite and poison Emma. At home, Papa asks about the diorama presentation, and Billy explains how Mrs. Silver complimented the glitter.



Papa is working in the garage while Sal is napping on a nearby chair. Over a snack of cookies, Billy asks Papa if he can call him “Dad” instead of “Papa”. They practice it – with Papa saying “Hi Billy” and Billy saying “Hi Dad” until they both laugh hysterically.

Part 2, Chapter 5 – When Mama gets home, Billy explains he is going to begin calling her “Mom”. She responds by saying that Billy is growing up. Sal doesn’t understand it, though. Papa then brings Billy out to the garage to show Billy the cigar box dioramas he is working on – he will call them “assemblages”, and he thanks Billy for the idea. They range from landscapes to an unfinished portrait of Billy. Papa says he will make one of Mama and Sal, too, if it turns out well. Papa ruffles Billy’s hair, and discovers Billy’s lump has entirely disappeared. Billy accidentally calls Papa, “Papa,” but says he will never forget who he really is. They head into the house to share news of the disappearance of the lump.

Analysis

The importance of ideas continues to recur in the novel through the second part. Billy’s dad is struggling with his art, seeking to do something important, and seeking a breakthrough. Though he is not making much, if any, money, he is absolutely driven by his love of art and love of creation. The cello that Papa had been carting around in Part 1 becomes something of an unfinished sculpture in Part 2, though it is now a cello with four mannequin arms attached. It is clear, however, that Papa is not satisfied with the product, for he becomes agitated by it. It doesn’t seem to be speaking to him in the way the he hopes it should be – that what he’s doing isn’t making sense to him. Indeed, it seems as if his frustration is overtaking his love of art – but a suggestion by Billy that Papa use cigar boxes to make dioramas is an idea taken to heart by Papa. He begins to do just that.

As Papa’s art begins to evolve, so too, in a way, does Billy. He gets older, and grows up a little. He has always referred to his mother and father as Mama and Papa, but wonders if this is too childish. The thought is confirmed by Emma, who overhears Billy call his father Papa, and she calls this babyish. At home, Billy talks this over with his father, asking him if he may call his father Dad instead of Papa. Papa says he has no problem with this at all, and neither does Mama. Indeed, Mama sees it as a sign of Billy getting older. However, as the novel continues, Billy will continue to personally refer to his parents as Mama and Papa, though sometimes, he will call them Mom and Dad. Indeed, Billy’s desire to be more grown up can be in the way in which he looks at his own diorama as appearing to have been done by a 2-year-old, instead of a second grader.

When Sal dumps glitter into Billy’s diorama, it is Papa who saves the day with a hairdryer, and a strong knowledge of earth science. He compares the glitter to mica, a mineral that makes up rock, often causing rock to look sparkly – and this is an idea that Billy takes to heart, and uses it to describe his diorama. This earns approval from Mrs. Silver, who thinks the use of glitter was a very good idea. Emma, however, refers to the



bat in the diorama as a “Papa bat”, demonstrating that she is a problem that Billy has yet to figure out to handle.

Discussion Question 1

What idea does Billy give Papa when it comes to his art? How does Papa use this idea?

Discussion Question 2

In what way does Billy try to grow up a little in Part 2? Do you believe this is an important step for Billy? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Billy believe at first that his diorama looks like a 2-year-old made it? How does he come around to see it differently?

Vocabulary

superior, replicate, diligently, radiant, imperfections, overwhelming, authentic, unison, dramatically, abruptly, oblivious, companionable



Part 3

Summary

Part 3, Chapter 1 – It is winter. Billy cannot stand his sister. Sal is crying hysterically, but stops. She is cuddling with Gabby, the babysitter. It is Friday night, and it is snowing. Papa and Mama have driven to Chicago overnight, where a gallery is showing Papa's assemblages. The plan was for Ned to spend the night at Billy's, and Gabby would take them all out for dinner at Ruby's Cupboard. Billy and Ned have secretly planned to stay up all night. But Ned gets sick at school, and cannot come over. Sal bursts into tears after Papa and Mama drive away. Nothing can stop her from crying, until she cries herself out. Gabby then drives Billy and Sal to Ruby's Cupboard.

Part 3, Chapter 2 – At Ruby's Cupboard, Sal becomes happy again. She is excited to be there, for it is bright and warm and a model train runs around the entire restaurant. While eating, the table next to them sings happy birthday to one of the customers, and Sal says she, Gabby, and Billy should also celebrate something. Billy suggests celebrating the Chinese New Year, the Year of the Dragon, which began the previous Monday. He explains the Chinese base their calendars on the moon and shows off a fake pearl, given out by Mrs. Silver, to represent special powers of the dragon. Billy also has an envelope with a Chinese Dragon stamp on it, and says Mrs. Silver gave those out as well for the students to write letters to people. Sal asks to have the pearl, but Billy will not give it to her. For dessert, they have ice cream and roar like dragons. Then, they head home. Billy still intends to stay up all night, and finds it a good thing that Sal thinks his pearl has special powers, and so it makes the pearl very powerful in Billy's eyes.

Part 3, Chapter 3 – Billy waits until Gabby goes to sleep, and then turns on the light in his bedroom. He does everything he can think of to stay awake, from counting backwards from one thousand, to reading. He finally decides to scare himself to stay awake, so he thinks up an evil monster that eats children. He scares himself out of his room, and he goes and wakes up Sal.

Part 3, Chapter 4 – Billy calms down as he wakes up Sal. He doesn't want to tell her he needs her, so he just tells her hello. He feels safer with her. Billy offers to give her the pearl if she stays up all night with him. Billy allows her to borrow it until the morning, when she can keep it. It is 10:32 at night. Sal says they can play with the Drop Sisters, which will help her stay awake. Billy agrees. He decides to use the pillowcase that Sal carries the Drop Sisters around in to fill with clothing, ties one end, and turns it into a big whale. Billy names the big whale Coughdrop, and Sal instantly falls in love with her. It is soon 11:03, and Sal falls asleep on the floor. Billy covers her with blankets, and then lays down next to her. As he falls asleep, Sal tells him that she loves him.

Part 3, Chapter 5 – Gabby wakes Billy and Sal up the next morning. It is nearly lunchtime, and Mama and Papa will be home in an hour. Gabby reveals that Papa has sold five pieces of art, and sounds happy. Billy is not happy, because he did not even



make it to midnight. Gabby, Billy, and Sal decide to make a big brunch for the arrival of Mama and Papa. Billy decides to give Sal the pearl as a way to say thank you for trying to stay up with him, and for making him feel safe. He decides to use his envelope to write a letter to Sal, telling her they will make it to morning next time, and that she is okay. He then heads downstairs as his sister starts screaming excitedly that their parents are home.

Analysis

Whereas the first part of the novel dealt primarily with Billy's relationship with Mrs. Silver, and second part dealt with Billy's relationship with his father, the third part tackles the relationship between Billy and his annoying little sister, Sal. All along through the novel, Sal has lived up to her role as an annoying little sister in the eyes of Billy, though she appears sweet and gentle to their parents. When Mama and Papa go out of town, Sal spends quite a bit of time crying, causing plans to go to Ruby's Cupboard to be delayed. This annoys Billy to no end. At the restaurant, Sal's begging of Billy to let her have the pearl from class further annoys Billy, though it makes him realize how important the pearl is to her, and therefore, it becomes very importance to him. To what end Bill will use this newfound power is unclear at first.

Billy, disappointed by Ned's inability to sleep over due to being sick, nevertheless decides to continue on with the plan of staying up all night. He does his best to keep up Gabby as late as possible, and then pretends to go to bed. When he is sure she is asleep, Billy turns on the light in his room, and commits to various activities – such as reading and counting – to try to stay awake. It does not work. He decides to scare himself awake by letting his imagination run wild, and creating a monster in his mind that eats children. His plan works, too well – and he finds himself seeking security from the last person he would have ever imagined – his baby sister. He wakes her up, and gets her to agree to stay up all night in exchange for the pearl. For the first time in the novel, brother and sister appear to have a real connection, playing and then falling asleep beside one another on the floor. What is remarkably interesting is that, the following morning, Billy gives the pearl to Sal anyways, even though she didn't make it all night. He also uses the envelope and Chinese stamp given to him by Mrs. Silver to write a thank you note of sorts to Sal. He even goes so far as to tell Sal that she is okay. It is a touching moment, and demonstrates that there truly has been a connection between Billy and Sal.

Discussion Question 1

How does Billy's attempt to stay up all night go? What happens as a result? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Billy give Sal not only the pearl from second grade, but tell he she is "ok" in a letter as well?



Discussion Question 3

What does Billy learn from his attempt to stay up all night? How does this affect him in the future?

Vocabulary

wailing, tentatively, illuminating, continuously, supernatural, contagious, prolonging, envisioned, frantic, provisions, ricocheting



Part 4

Summary

Part 4, Chapter 1 – May is very hot and very dry. There is no air-conditioning in Room 2, so Billy has been sweaty all day. Sal is on the front porch, eating blueberries. The Drop Sisters are inside, to stay clean. Billy goes to talk to Papa about a problem he has. The end-of-year show that Mrs. Silver is organizing will feature students reading original poems about a family member. But students can only choose one family member, and that family member gets to be up on the stage. Papa tells him that it doesn't matter who he writes about, because both Papa and Mama will be happy with the decision. By dinner, Billy has not yet made up his mind. He thinks Mama will be better for the poem, since she teaches poetry in English class and would make her happier. So neither Papa nor Mama will feel bad, Billy has them guess numbers, and whatever number Mama guesses will be the right number. Though he has figured out who to pick, he now needs to write the poem.

Part 4, Chapter 2 – As the end of the year, and the play, approach, Mrs. Silver devotes a lot of time to poetry in class. Everyone in class is given a new notebook to serve as poetry journals. Billy considers what kind of poem to write, and thinks he will either write a haiku, acrostic, or free verse, because they can be shorter and don't have to rhyme. He decides to write an acrostic for MOM –My Only Mom. Mrs. Silver encourages him to try his hand at a haiku. She encourages Billy to bring home his journal, to write down things his mom likes. Billy hates homework, because his mind is already focusing on summer vacation.

Part 4, Chapter 3 – Billy, Sal, Mama, and Papa go to Ruby's Cupboard for dinner. That night, Billy sits down with his mom and she goes over the poems he has already written. She likes them. Billy asks her what else she likes, and she goes on to say that she likes coffee, chocolate, rainy days, and so on. They hear a bang at the window, and when they go outside to check, they find that a bird –a robin – has flown into it, and died. They bury the bird. They don't say anything, and Mama explains she loves the quiet, because she can hear everything. Billy listens, and can hear everything from leaves rustling to dog barking blocks away. It is poetic to Billy, and he does his best to remember as much of it as he can. He writes a poem called "Quiet Mom" about how his mom loves the quiet, so she can hear other sounds, and how quiet is a dead bird. Billy gets a smiley face on his poem.

Part 4, Chapter 4 – Billy practices reading his poem to the cello with four mannequin arms, adding his baseball cap to the top. Everyone nicknames the cello "Poetry Man". The students practice reading their poems at school. Mrs. Silver tells them that they will all have copies of their poems while they say them, just in case anyone who chooses to memorize will have a prompt if they forget the words. Emma has memorized her poem and says she will not need a copy of it. The students also work on a big backdrop painting with the words "We Are Family" on it. They then work on personalized



invitations to the event. Billy draws a picture of Poetry Man, and Emma questions him as to why he is drawing a musical instrument for a poetry show. Billy ignores her. Emma says her grandmother is coming all the way from Minneapolis, so memorizing makes it more special. Billy angrily agrees. He thinks his mom might be even more proud of him, so he memorizes his poem, but at rehearsal, forgets it. He is grateful for the copy of his poem so he can read it, and vows to do better at the real show.

Part 4, Chapter 5 – Billy borrows Sal’s pearl for good luck the night of the show. Mama tells Billy how much she loves the poem. The family makes its way to the show with Ned’s family. Papa has brought along homemade cookies for the after-party. Billy and Ned are excited that there are only six more days to the school year. The show gets underway, and the students and the people they wrote about take the stage, one after the other. Emma has memorized her poem, and recites it without a problem. Billy rubs the pearl in his pocket for good luck, and believes he can also recite his poem from memory if Emma can. But Billy forgets the words, and Mama hands him his poem to read. The audience claps happily when he is done. Mama gives Billy a huge hug in the hallway. He asks her why she had a copy of the poem. He asks if she thought he couldn’t do it. She explains that she only wanted a souvenir from the night.

At the after-party, Ned brags about how much feedback he had from the microphone when he recited his poem. Mrs. Silver concludes the evening by talking about how much the students have learned, and says that, although it was the Chinese Year of the Rabbit and Year of the Dragon, she believes it has been the Year of Room Two. Many of the parents hug her. With the microphone off, Billy tries his poem again, just for Mama, and recites it without a flaw. He is so happy he leans back into the microphone and tells her it is the Year of Billy Miller.

Analysis

When Part 4 of the novel opens, nearly the entire school year has passed. It is now May, and the weather is already hot, which causes Billy, Ned, and their classmates to look forward to summer with great anxiety. The night of the poetry reading show, Billy and Ned are especially excited because there are only six days left in the school year. While the first three parts of the novel have dealt with Billy’s relationship with his father, sister, and teacher, the fourth part of the novel deals primarily with Billy’s relationship with his mother. It is his relationship with his mother that appears most touching, for Billy decides to write his year-end poem about his mother. Through the novel, Billy has learned from others, and learned about himself, but his mother offers him something absolutely unique apart from her unconditional love for him. She offers him a different way of looking at the world without Billy even realizing it, by calling his attention to quiet, and what can be heard in the quiet.

By Part 4, Billy has come to accept certain things about the world, whether it is an encounter with death by way of the robin that flies into the window, or the ongoing nagging and insults by way of Emma Sparks. When it comes to Emma, the situation is not resolved, but Billy is handling it by simply ignoring her, or using her as a reason to



do better. For example, Emma's insistence that she doesn't need to reference a copy of her poem to recite it leads Billy to attempt to do the same – and he practices on the cello for an audience, now dubbed "Poetry Man". While Billy does not succeed at reciting his poem from memory the night of the show, he does succeed in reciting it from paper – from a copy his mom hands him at the last minute. The love that passes between mother and son in this moment is clear and touching: the son reciting a poem about his mother, and the mother who makes it possible for the son to recite the poem at all.

The dead bird itself has symbolic meaning that factors into the end of the novel. Birds are associated with flight and freedom, but the death of the bird in the novel deals with the death of flight and freedom, or rather, the negation of it. Childhood is often described as the freest, most worry-free time of human life, and another year of Billy's childhood has passed by. The death of the bird is the death of innocence, to some extent – between the problems Billy has faced in second grade, to the experience of death itself through the bird. In a way, the bird signifies as well that the Year of Billy Miller has ended – and it is something Billy shares only with his mother, both the night of the burial of the bird, and the night of the show.

Discussion Question 1

Who does Billy decide to write his poem about? Why? Why does he go through such elaborate lengths to announce his decision?

Discussion Question 2

What is the importance of the dead bird in this part of the novel? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

Why does Billy recite his poem for the second time, even though only Mama hears him?

Vocabulary

blistering, pursed, deliberate, limericks, acrostic, progressive, syllables, preoccupied, graffiti, authority



Characters

Billy Miller

Billy Miller is the main character and principal protagonist of the novel “The Year of Billy Miller” by Kevin Henkes. Billy Miller is an average 7-year-old boy, who is beginning second grade at the start of the novel. Billy and his family live in Constant, Wisconsin. Billy has loving parents, whom he calls Papa and Mama, and an annoying little sister named Sal. His best friend, Ned, lives down the block. Unlike other kids, Billy is worried about beginning second grade due to the accident he had a few weeks before at the Jolly Green Giant statue, where he fell from a lookout platform while trying to catch his baseball cap, blown away by the wind. Billy gets knocked out, wakes up in the hospital, and the doctor confirms that Billy is alright, though he will have a lump on his head for quite a while. It leads Billy to think he may not be smart enough for second grade. Papa disagrees, noting that it will be his year.

In second grade, Billy encounters his share of problems, none of which have to do with his intelligence. There is Emma Sparks, a bossy girl who behaves more like an adult than a little kid, who makes fun of Billy and says snide things to him throughout the novel. Billy holds two red markers up to his head and makes a devil face at her, but he is seen by Mrs. Silver, the teacher, who frowns. Billy worries that Mrs. Silver believes he was making fun of the red chopsticks she wears in her hair, and that he is not nice. He gives her a few silver-colored gifts, such as a paperclip and nail, which she accepts, telling Billy that she knows he is nice.

As the novel moves on, Billy comes to learn and accept several things, as well as to help others. He learns that the best way to deal with Emma is to simply ignore her. When Papa becomes frustrated with his art, Billy suggests Papa make dioramas, since he is so good at them, which Papa then decides to take one step further, and make assemblages.

During an attempt to stay up all night, Billy’s imagination runs wild and he seeks out comfort from his little sister, who unknowingly provides it. As a result, he gives Sal a pearl from second grade that she has had her eye on. Mama teaches Billy to look at the world in a new way, when everything is quiet, and when everything can be heard in the quiet. Billy in turn writes his assigned year-end poem about Mama, and concludes that it has been the Year of Billy Miller.

Sal

Sally “Sal” Miller is the younger sister of Billy Miller, and is the daughter of Mama and Papa. Sal is three years old, and is absolutely adorable to her parents, but to Billy, she is a typical, annoying little sister. Sal is rarely ever present without the Drop Sisters, five similar whale toys that bear different names that range from Raindrop to Gumdrop. Sal



is notorious for doing things to upset Billy, such as dumping glitter into his diorama project for school, and wanting everything that Billy has, such as a pearl given to Billy and the other students in his class by Mrs. Silver. Billy and Sal come to something of an understanding the night that Billy attempts to stay up until the next morning, but becomes frightened and seeks out safety in his sister's room. She unknowingly makes Billy feel better, which leads to Billy giving her the pearl and giving her a note that says she's okay. Billy's relationship with Sal forms the third part of the novel.

Mama

Mama is the mother of Billy Miller and Sal Miller, and is the wife of Papa. She is a high school English teacher, and is a devoted mother and wife. She cares deeply for her family, and does all that she can for them. Mama ultimately becomes the subject of Billy's year-end poem, and helps him to see the world in a different way when they bury a dead bird. She gets him to hear the quiet, but then to hear everything else that can be heard when it is quiet. When Billy forgets the words to his poem at the year-end show, she hands him a copy of his poem so that he can recite it. At the end of the show, when no one is looking or listening except Mama, Billy recites his poem from memory without effort, and tells his mother that it is has been the Year of Billy Miller.

Papa

Papa is the father of Billy Miller and Sal Miller, and is the husband of Mama. Papa is a stay-at-home dad, but is not a typical stay-at-home parent. He works from home as an artist, though he has yet to have his breakthrough. Papa works in found-object sculptures, but is not getting along very well. The work is not speaking to him. Papa helps Billy with his bat cave diorama for school, and when Sal dumps glitter in Billy's diorama, Papa uses a hairdryer to blow most of it out –and tells Billy that real rocks can sparkle. Billy suggests Papa make dioramas as art, and Papa decides to give it a try, going one step further and making assemblages. They are a hit, and his career begins to take off. It is Papa who first reassures Billy that his second grade year will be a good one, and will be his year.

Mrs. Silver

Mrs. Silver is the second grade teacher in Room 2 at Georgia O'Keefe Elementary School. Billy, Ned, Emma Sparks, and Grace Cotter are in her class. Mrs. Silver loves Chinese culture and history, and incorporates this into class whenever she can. She is immensely intelligent, kind, and caring. She is married, and has a baby boy at home.

Ned

Ned is the best friend of Billy Miller. Ned lives down the block with his family. Ned walks with Billy to school every morning, and home every afternoon. They are sometimes



followed by Ned's mom and Billy's dad, to make sure they get to school safely. Ned is a good best friend, standing by Billy when Emma makes fun of him.

Emma Sparks

Emma Sparks is a bossy girl in Billy's second grade class. She is immediately at odds with Billy because Billy sits in her seat, and she later takes every chance she can to make fun of Billy. While she and Billy never reach an understanding, they tolerate one another through the novel.

Grace Cotter

Grace Cotter is a girl who sits near Billy, Ned, and Emma in class. She is very quiet, very kind, and very artistic.

Gabby

Gabby is the young woman who is Billy and Sal's babysitter when Mama and Papa go to Chicago overnight for an art show. Gabby is very sweet, very kind, and very caring. She brings Billy and Sal out to eat at Ruby's Cupboard, and then stays up a little later than usual to play cards with Billy, unaware that he plans to stay up all night.



Symbols and Symbolism

Baseball Cap

Billy's parents purchase a baseball cap for Billy when they visit Mount Rushmore. The cap says "Black Hills" on it, and is nearly carried away by the wind at the Jolly Green Giant statue. Billy lunges to keep the cap, but falls from the observation platform, narrowly avoiding serious injury in the process. Later in the novel, the cap comes to grace the top of the cello-mannequin sculpture his father has made, called "Poetry Man".

Dioramas

Dioramas of animal habitats are created by Billy and Ned for their class, and by Sal because she wants to make one for the Drop Sisters. Billy worries that his bat cave diorama looks like a two-year old has made it, even though his father helps him. Disaster strikes when Sal puts glitter into the cave, but Papa saves the day by removing most of the glitter, and then telling Billy that mica, a mineral that makes up rocks, can often make rock sparkle, such as in a bat cave. Mrs. Silver approves of Billy's diorama. Billy later suggests that Papa make dioramas his new form of art, which he does by taking them one step further, and calling them assemblages.

Assemblages

Assemblages are a form of art similar to dioramas, and are constructed by Papa at the suggestion of Billy. Assemblages can depict scenes, people, faces, objects, places, and so on – and Papa uses old cigar boxes to create landscapes and portraits. These prove to be his breakthrough, for Papa sells five assemblages at an art show in Chicago in the winter.

The Poetry Man

The Poetry Man is a sculpture created by Papa, which is made from an old cello and four mannequin hands, topped off by Billy's baseball cap. Billy uses Poetry Man as a mock audience member as he practices for the class's year-end poetry show.

Poems

Poems are written by the students in Mrs. Silver's class for their year-end show. Mrs. Silver explains that the poems can be in any form, but they must be about a family member or loved one. Emma chooses her grandmother, for example, while Billy chooses his mother. Billy attempts to memorize the poem for the show, even though it is



not required. Though Billy is not successful, his poem is still a hit with the audience, and Billy's mom especially loves the poem.

Glitter

Glitter is used by Sal in her diorama for the Drop Sisters. She believes that Billy's diorama of a bat cave needs some glitter as well, so she dumps glitter from her diorama into Billy's diorama, which stuns Billy. Papa is able to remove most of the glitter, and explains to Billy that in real life, rocks will sometimes sparker because some are composed of mica, a shiny mineral. Mrs. Silver contends that the glitter in Billy's diorama is a very good effect.

Fake Pearls

Fake pearls are given out to the second grade students in Mrs. Silver's class by Mrs. Silver for Chinese New Year, which happens to be the Year of the Dragon. The dragon clutches a pearl in his claws to symbolize special powers, and so this makes Sal want the pearl. Billy refuses to give it to her at first. When Billy attempts to stay up all night, but gets scared, he goes to spend time with Sal, who unknowingly helps Billy feel better. Billy gives her the pearl in thanks for her kindness. Billy later borrows the pearl for good luck, and puts it in his pocket during the year-end show.

The Drop Sisters

The Drop Sisters are five similarly designed, pastel yellow whales that Sal owns and carries around in an old pillowcase. The oldest is Raindrop, and the other four (Dewdrop, Snowdrop, Gumdrop, and Lemondrop) were originally purchased by family and friends in case Sal ever lost Raindrop. But Sal discovers them in her parents' closet one day, and adopts them all at once. At only one point in the novel is Sal without any of the Drop Sisters, and that is when she is on the front porch eating blueberries, so the Sisters will not get dirty.



Settings

Constant, Wisconsin

Constant, Wisconsin is the fictional town in which Billy Miller and his family live and work. Constant is a friendly, safe community, for oftentimes, Billy and Ned walk to school by themselves. It seems to be a rather artistic and culturally-observant community as well, for Mrs. Silver is heavily interested in China, while Papa is a found-object sculptor, and Mama teaches English. The town also appears to be somewhere near Lake Michigan, for there is often fog from the lake that impacts the town, and the town is close enough to, but far enough away from, Chicago, Illinois, to warrant an overnight trip for Mama and Papa.

Jolly Green Giant Statue

The Jolly Green Giant statue is located in Blue Earth, Minnesota, and is where Billy and his family stop to visit as they head back home from Mount Rushmore. It is at the statue's lookout platform that Billy nearly loses his hat to the wind, lunges to grab it, and then falls from the platform. As a result, he hits his head, and ends up with a large lump which he proudly shows to Ned. Yet, this also causes Billy to worry that he will not be smart enough for second grade.

Mount Rushmore

Mount Rushmore is located in the Black Hills of South Dakota, and is a massive sculpture of four American presidents – George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt, carved into a mountainside. It is to Mount Rushmore that the Miller family travels for summer vacation, and are returning from when they stop at the Jolly Green Giant stature in Minnesota.

Room 2

Room 2 is located at Georgia O'Keefe Elementary School. It is overseen by Mrs. Silver, and is where the second grade class of Billy Miller meets to learn every day. Ned is also a part of Billy's class in Room 2, as are Emma Sparks and Grace Cotter. Much of the novel occurs in Room 2, such as when the students are tasked with drawing habitats, or beginning the work on their year-end poems. While Room 2 has heating, it does not have air-conditioning. In May, as the weather turns hot, the students cannot wait to be out of class because there is no air-conditioning, and because they know summer is coming.



Garage

The garage at the Miller household is where Papa works on his found-object sculptures, rather than where the cars are parked. The garage is full of all kinds of found objects, from silver garden balls to cigar boxes to cellos, as well as various sculptures Papa has made. The garage is also where Papa goes to work on his new art form, assemblages, in the middle of the novel.

Billy's Bedroom

Billy's Bedroom is where Billy sleeps, plays, and does some homework. When Billy attempts to stay up all night, he tries to do so in his bedroom by reading, counting backwards from a thousand, and finally lets his imagination run wild to scare himself awake. The plan works too good, and Billy becomes afraid of his bedroom for a while.



Themes and Motifs

Growing Up

Growing up is an important, underlying theme in Kevin Henkes's novel "The Year of Billy Miller". Growing up is very similar to coming of age, though growing up focuses on younger characters, and involves new ideas, actions, and ways of behaving as the characters get older. Like coming of age stories, stories about growing will also include growth in terms of character as well. In the novel, it is Billy Miller himself who experiences growing up.

Billy Miller is seven, and wonders if he is too old now to call his parents "Mama" and "Papa". After Emma makes fun of Billy for calling Papa, Papa, Billy decides he should now begin calling his parents "Mom" and "Dad". As a result, this leads his mother to remark that Billy is indeed growing up. As the school year progresses, Billy and Ned are allowed to walk to school together alone, sometimes, evidence not only of the safe town in which they live, but evidence as well of the fact they are both growing up. As the novel progresses, Billy's character as a person grows as well, as his sister unknowingly provides him with reassurance when he is scared, and as a result, he grows closer to her, becoming more appreciative of her than he had previously been. He happily gives her the fake pearl she has been asking for as a show of thanks, and even creates a new Drop Sister for Sal out of her old pillowcase.

The biggest example of Billy's growing up comes toward the end of the novel, where a bird flies into the window, and dies. This is the first encounter Billy has had with death, and his mom guides him through it, by burying the bird in the backyard. The bird, traditionally symbolic of freedom, becomes symbolic of the end of freedom. Childhood is often considered the freest time of a person's life, but as people get older, the freedoms they enjoyed as children diminish. Indeed, childhood itself disappears –and such is the case with Billy. He is growing up, and getting older, and another year of childhood has gone by. As the year ends, the year is symbolically buried in the form of the bird by Billy's mother, the woman who gave him life.

Family

Family is a major and important theme in the novel "The Year of Billy Miller" by Kevin Henkes. Family, thematically, involves love, compassion, loyalty, encouragement, and support of others who may or may not be blood-related, but who still function and behave in the way of the traditional family unit. Such is clearly the case with the Miller family.

While the Miller family seems to be a little unorthodox at first – Mama leaves home to work while Papa stays at home, to care for the house as well as to do work of his own – they behave as a traditional, close-knit family. Both Mama and Papa love their children



more than anything, and order their lives around providing for, protecting, and helping their children to grow. Papa takes time out of his schedule in order to help Billy with his schoolwork, for example, while on the weekends, Mama takes as much time as possible to spend with her children, involving them in even seemingly simple activities, such as baking, which becomes a family event. Likewise, when it comes to meals, the family always eats together, taking time out of the day to simply be with one another in the process.

Indeed, each of the family members ultimately helps one another in various ways. Mama helps Billy to understand the world in new ways, such as coming to appreciate the quiet. Billy, in turn, writes a poem for Mama for the year-end show at school, and gives Papa the idea that leads to Papa creating assemblages. Sal unknowingly reassures and comforts Billy the night he tries to stay up until dawn, and scares himself; in turn, he gives her a pearl and writes her a note, saying that she is okay. When Papa's art goes up in a gallery show, Mama lovingly travels to Chicago with him overnight to support him.

Art

Art is an important theme in the novel "The Year of Billy Miller" by Kevin Henkes. Art appears in many forms in the novel, and in many different ways. Henkes underscores the importance of art in the novel as well, by making it prominent in the lives of the characters, and the fictional town in which they live. Art is so important to these people, that they have decided to make a living by doing it, whether they are actually creating sculptures, or teaching it to others.

The town itself is host to an elementary school named not after a president, public official, or important historical figure, but an artist who was famous for her paintings of flowers – George O'Keefe. Billy's father is an artist as well, in the form of a sculptor who uses found objects, such as cellos and cigar boxes –to create his work. Indeed, art is his life's work, and he travels all the way to Chicago to sell it and earn money from his work. Mama goes with Papa overnight to Chicago for the gallery showing at which Papa sells five works of art.

Art does not have to be visual, either, in the novel. Billy's mother teaches English at the high school level, and reads classic literature, such as "Pride and Prejudice", revealing that even the written word is a form of art as well. At the end of the novel, Mrs. Silver has her students write poetry, which becomes a very personal, important artistic endeavor. Indeed, Billy's poem has tremendous visual imagery in it, all stemming from the idea of quiet.

Ideas

Ideas are a major theme and motif in the novel "The Year of Billy Miller" by Kevin Henkes. Ideas are thoughts or ways of thinking that are new, unusual, or unexpected,



and can lead to great changes in the lives of people. Ideas become an important part and aspect of Billy's life, especially when it comes to his family.

The first major idea that comes about in the novel comes by way of Sal, Billy's three year-old sister. She suggests that Billy give Mrs. Silver the silver garden ball their father has found, so Billy will be Mrs. Silver's favorite. Billy adapts this idea by giving Mrs. Silver a series of silver-colored gifts, so that she will know he is nice.

The second major idea comes by way of Billy's father. Papa has been helping Billy, Ned, and Sal make dioramas. Billy's diorama depicts a bat cave habitat. But Sal dumps glitter into the cave, thinking it needs fairy dust, and Billy believes his diorama is ruined. But Papa uses a hairdryer to remove most of the glitter, and then tells Billy that in real life, some rocks sparkle because of they contain the shiny mineral, mica. So in reality, Papa explains, Billy's diorama is more accurate. Billy explains this when he presents his diorama to the class, and he is congratulated on the realistic use of glitter.

The third major idea comes by way of Billy, who worries about his father's inability to find his breakthrough in art. He suggests Papa work on dioramas, since he is so good at them, which inspires Papa to take them one step further, and to create assemblages. These prove to be his breakthrough, leading to a show in Chicago, and the sale of five whole assemblages.

The fourth major idea in the novel owes itself to Mama, who is very reflective and very deep. She encourages Billy to enjoy the quiet, including at night, when in the quiet, many other things can be heard, such as birds and dogs in the distance. This is a new idea for Billy, a new way of looking at, and listening to, the world. He incorporates this, ultimately, into the poem he writes about his mother.

The Year of Billy Miller

"The Year of Billy Miller" serves not only as a title for the novel by Kevin Henkes, but also proves to be a motif in and of itself that is found throughout the novel. At the beginning of the book, Billy worries that he will not be smart enough to handle second grade due to his fall over the summer. Billy's father disagrees, and drawing on Mrs. Silver's summer letter which mentions the Chinese Year of the Rabbit, Billy's father says it will instead be the Year of Billy Miller, meaning that it will be an important year for him. Papa is very right.

What is interesting, though, is that the Year of Billy Miller doesn't happen to be some epic series of adventures or quests; rather, the Year of Billy Miller is a typical and ordinary year in his life. What makes the Year of Billy Miller exceptional is that it is unexceptional, and so may relate to anyone at all who reads the novel. The biggest challenges that Billy faces over the course of the year include having to deal with the bossy Emma Sparks at school, staying up all night while his parents are in Chicago, and writing and preparing to present a poem at the end-of-year show, at which all the families and friends of students will be present.

The Year of Billy Miller doesn't just have Billy meeting these challenges (sometimes he succeeds wildly, other times, he fails completely), but has Billy growing up some as well. His life improves in many ways because of this, for as he grows older, he grows closer to his family, including Sal. He learns to think about the world in different ways, courtesy of his mother. He becomes a source of inspiration to his father's artwork. And the Year of Billy Miller demonstrates what an impact those in the world around him have on him, and how Billy, in turn himself, impacts those around him – all for the better.

Styles

Point of View

Kevin Henkes tells his novel “The Year of Billy Miller” from the third-person limited-omniscient point of view, with the central focus being main character and principal protagonist, Billy. The third-person narrator recounts the adventures and events of Billy’s second grade year, from the end of the summer before school begins to the end of spring, right before school lets out. The narration mostly follows Billy, including his inmost thoughts and considerations – such as being worried about beginning second grade. The third-person narrative also allows the writer to include important information for the reader that does not directly concern Billy, but figures into the plot overall, such as the Drop Sisters. The limited-omniscient narrative also allows a sense of unknowing, which factors into Billy’s life, and allows readers to learn things only as Billy learns them. For example, early on in the novel, Billy does not know whether or not Mrs. Silver thinks he is mean, and this causes him great anxiety as he seeks to demonstrate that he is actually nice.

Language and Meaning

Kevin Henkes tells his novel “The Year of Billy Miller” in language that is simple and straightforward. This is done for at least two primary reasons. First, the main character in the novel – Billy Miller – is seven years old, and the simple, straightforward language reflects both his age and how others – including adults – approach him as a 7-year-old. The language used in the novel is also simple and straightforward because the novel is aimed at an audience of children, and so must be understandable to them. Whenever Henkes uses language that may not be familiar to them – such as how Papa decides to build assemblages – the term is explained in detail.

Structure

Kevin Henkes divides his novel “The Year of Billy Miller” into four main parts, with each part being further subdivided into five linear, chronological, numerical chapters, from 1 to 5. Each part overall reflects Billy’s relationship with a particular person in his life. Part 1 deals with Mrs. Silver, while Part 2 deals with Papa. Part 3 focuses on Billy’s relationship with his sister, Sal, while Part 4 focuses on Billy’s relationship with Mama. Each of the chapters in each of the parts deals in some way with the overall relationship, whether Billy learns, helps, or grows from that relationship. For example, in Part 4, Billy grows to understand the world in a new way, thanks to his mother, who gives him an appreciation for quietness at night. Each of the chapters in each of the parts also deal with the overall relationship in question in connected events. For example, Part 3’s chapters form a consistent storyline, where Billy’s parents are away

and Billy wants to stay up all night, but ends up coming to appreciate Sal as he becomes scared of his own bedroom.

Quotes

It was the first day of second grade and Billy Miller was worried. He was worried that he wouldn't be smart enough for school this year.

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: The narrator explains that this is the first day of Billy Miller's second grade year at school, and reveals right away that Billy is worried because he doesn't think he will be smart enough. This stems from a fall from a lookout platform Billy endured while on summer vacation, in which he hit his head pretty hard, but not hard enough to cause any real damage. It is the first concern of many that Billy will have over the course of the novel.

Mrs. Silver and the great nation of China might think that this is the Year of the Rabbit," said Papa. "But I know –and I know everything –that this is the year of Billy Miller.

-- Papa (Part 1, Chapter 1 paragraph 37)

Importance: Papa reassures Billy that, yes, he will be smart enough for second grade. In fact, Papa is so convinced that Billy will do so well in the coming year, it will be his year, not the Year of the Rabbit. This statement paves the way for the rest of the novel, and all of the normal adventures that Billy will have in the coming months.

The doctor in Minnesota had said Billy was lucky. But Ms. Silver had just said that he was smart. Smart.

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 5 paragraph 62)

Importance: The first major worry that Billy has in the novel, about being smart enough to get through second grade, is put to rest by his second grade teacher, Mrs. Silver. She contends that Billy is indeed very smart, and this gives Billy hope, for if the person who teaches second grade thinks he is smart enough for second grade, then he must indeed be so.

I was thinking that you're so good at dioramas, then you should make dioramas for your artwork.

-- Billy (Part 2, Chapter 3 paragraph 18)

Importance: Papa has been struggling with his art, seeking a breakthrough. Papa, who has that day helped Billy, Ned, and Sal create dioramas, considers what Billy says -that he should try his hand at dioramas as an art form. It is an idea Papa takes to heart, and takes one step further by creating actual assemblages, rather than just dioramas. This does indeed prove to be a breakthrough for Papa, thanks to Billy's idea.

I guess you're growing up.

-- Mama (Part 2, Chapter 5 paragraph 6)

Importance: In this part of the book, Billy has been wondering whether or not he is too



old to call his parents "Mama" and "Papa". When Emma makes fun of Billy for it, he decides it is time to start calling them "Mom" and "Dad". This causes Mama to reflect on Billy growing up, and becomes one of the themes for the novel.

And, now, here he was, in his room, ready to begin the night of staying awake.
-- Narrator (Part 3, Chapter 3 paragraph 19)

Importance: Billy has been secretly plotting to stay up all night, and though Ned is sick and cannot sleep over, Billy decides to try it on his own. Billy's decision to try to stay up all night will have important consequences. He ultimately resorts to scaring himself awake, which sends him running into Sal's room.

Billy scooped closer to Sal. He didn't know what to say. He couldn't say I need you, which was the truth. "Hi," he whispered.
-- Narrator (Part 3, Chapter 4 paragraph 5)

Importance: Billy, who has just scared himself to stay awake, unwittingly seeks comfort from his little sister, who unknowingly provides it. Billy, because he is the older brother, feels too tough to say that he needs Sal, so he simply tells her hello, and this begins the process of Billy coming to appreciate his sister more than he has before.

He hoped that Mama and Papa didn't go away overnight again for a long time. When they were both gone, the air in the house was harder to breathe, somehow.
-- Narrator (Part 3, Chapter 5 paragraph 40)

Importance: Billy misses his parents without even realizing it, or admitting it to himself. His thought that the air is harder to breathe speaks volumes about how deeply he loves his parents. This is demonstrated through his relationship with both Papa, as has been seen, and his relationship with Mama, which will be seen in the fourth part of the book.

Dear Sal, Will make it to morning next time. Your ok. Your brother, Billy.
-- Billy (Part 3, Chapter 5 paragraph 42)

Importance: This thank you letter to Sal from Billy is what Billy uses his envelope with a Chinese dragon stamp on it, for. This note is telling for three reasons. First, it is a thank you note of sorts. Second, it lets Sal know that Billy actually does like her. And third, it lays the groundwork for a future attempt for the siblings to stay up all night.

He's solved the problem of who to choose. But, now, of course, he had a poem to write.
-- Narrator (Part 4, Chapter 1 paragraph 45)

Importance: In the first chapter of Part 4, Billy struggles with the thought of having to figure out who to write his poem about. Though he ultimately settles on his mother, he now has to write the poem, which will give him some difficulty -but then bring him closer to his mother in the process.



Quiet can be loud if you listen.

-- Billy (Part 4, Chapter 3 paragraph 44)

Importance: This is a line from the poem Billy writes to his mother, following his learning that she loves the sound of silence, and all the things you can hear when it is quiet out. This is a way that Billy has never thought of things in the world before, and his mother has given him an entirely new way to approach the world because of it.

I just wanted a souvenir from this wonderful night.

-- Mama (Part 4, Chapter 5 paragraph 57)

Importance: Billy attempts to recite his poem from memory without a copy on hand, but is unable to do so -and his mother hands him a copy of the poem. Afterwards, he asks her if she took a copy from Mrs. Silver because she didn't believe he could do it, and Mama explains -to save his frail honor- that she merely wanted a souvenir from the night. It boosts Billy's self-confidence and pride tremendously.