

BOOK STATS

Grade Level Equivalent: 5–8

Ages: 11+

Genre: Historical Fiction, Free Verse

Pages: 227

Subject/Theme: Forgiveness, Survival, Courage

Guided Reading Level: X

Common Core State Standards	Reading	Writing	Listening & Speaking	Language
Grade 5	RL.5.1, RL.5.2, RL.5.4, RL.5.6	W.5.3	SL.5.1, SL.5.4	L.5.4
Grade 6	RL.6.1, RL.6.2, RL.6.4, RL.6.6	W.6.3	SL.6.1, SL.6.4	L.6.4
Grade 7	RL.7.1, RL.7.2, RL.7.4, RL.7.5	W.7.3	SL.7.1, SL.7.4	L.7.4
Grade 8	RL.8.1, RL.8.2, RL.8.3, RL.8.4	W.8.	SL.8.1, SL.8.4	L.8.4

Teaching the Book

In the midst of the Dust Bowl, with dust piling up like snow across the prairie, 14-year-old Billie Jo's life is transformed by a terrible accident. It leaves her scarred—inside and out. Karen Hesse's award-winning novel provides an unforgettable reading experience told in free verse against the backdrop of a desperate time in American history. Students will engage in activities including researching the history, geography, and art of the Dust Bowl.

Theme Focus: Historical Fiction

Comprehension Focus: Analyze Theme

Language Focus: Dust Bowl Vocabulary

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen Hesse was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1952. From an early age, she aspired to become an author, partly because of the encouragement of her fifth grade teacher. "Mrs. Datnoff believed I could be a professional writer some day and because she believed, I believed too. I love writing. I can't wait to get to my keyboard every morning. Adults often ask why I write for the younger set. My reply: I can't think of anyone I'd rather write for. Young readers are the most challenging, demanding, and rewarding of audiences."

In 1998, Hesse's novel *Out of the Dust* won the Newbery Medal. It is based on extensive research into the history of the Dust Bowl and the people who survived it. Hesse has authored several other award-winning works of historical fiction on topics that range from World War II to the Holocaust. Karen Hesse currently lives in Vermont with her husband and has two grown daughters.

Visit the Scholastic website for more information about Karen Hesse at: <http://bit.ly/VUf9gq>.

OVERVIEW

Book Summary

In powerful and lyrical free verse, Billie Jo Kelby tells the story of her life on the Oklahoma prairie from the winter of 1934 through the autumn of 1935—during the hard times of the Dust Bowl. Despite the constant dust storms and the struggle to make ends meet, Billie Jo is happy with her life. She loves to play the piano, her mother is pregnant with a much-wanted child, and her father is determined to keep their farm and home.

Then a terrible accident brings tragedy into Billie Jo's life. Her mother mistakes a pail of kerosene for water and pours it onto the stove. Trying to save her mother from the fire, Billie Jo accidentally makes things worse. After her mother and the baby die, Pa falls into a deep depression and Billie Jo can no longer play the piano because of the burns on her hands. Nor can she forgive her father or herself. Billie Jo's life is so painful, with her wound, her guilt, and the dust, that she tries to escape on a freight train. The journey results in Billie Jo's own personal journey toward forgiveness and healing.

Set against the backdrop of the Dust Bowl and the hardships faced by prairie families, the novel is a testament to the power of hope and the triumph of the human spirit.

Get Ready to Read

Pre-Reading Activities

Dust Bowl Provide students with a visual context for the dust storms to go with the dramatic and unreal descriptions in *Out of the Dust*. Fortunately, because the US government hired remarkable photographers such as Walker Evans to document the storms and the people who suffered through them, there is a rich visual history available. Share these photographs, from the Kansas State University website, to show how humans and the landscape were ravaged by dust storms during the 1930s by visiting: <http://bit.ly/WgzXPW>.

Before showing the photographs, share basic information about the Dust Bowl. Consider discussing how, by the 1930s, the soil in Oklahoma and neighboring states had become loose and dry partly as the result of converting too much wild grassland to farmland. Also consider sharing that wheat crops failed, and nearly 50 million acres were severely damaged before conservation measures helped put an end to the storms that threatened the lives of people and animals, as well as, the crops.

Preview and Predict Discuss with students the title and cover of the book. Explain that the image on the cover is a picture of a real girl from the 1930s. In the novel, the girl is named Billie Jo, and she narrates her own story of survival during the Dust Bowl. Ask students what sort of challenges they think Billie Jo might face in the story.

Vocabulary

Words from the Dust Bowl Explain to students that the author uses some unfamiliar words that were part of people's vocabulary during the Dust Bowl. She also uses words that describe the land-

scape of the times. The list below contains words from the world of the Dust Bowl. Ask students to look for clues in the text to figure out the words' meanings or to check dictionary definitions.

Use **Resource #1: Vocabulary Cards** on page 7 and distribute copies to students. Ask them to write down the definitions of the words as they read them in the book.

drought (p. 31)	withered (p. 39)
scorch (p. 81)	sod (p. 107)
duster (p. 109)	parched (p. 128)
migrants (p. 199)	gaunt (p. 200)



BIG QUESTION

Critical Thinking Ask students to think about this question as they read and be ready to answer it when they have finished the book. Write the question on chart paper or have students write it in their reading journals.

How will Billie Jo come "out of the dust"?

As You Read

Reading the Book

Modeled Reading First, ask students to read the season and date on page 1: Winter 1934. Note that the book is divided into seasons from winter, 1934 to autumn, 1935. Then read aloud the first poem in the book. Explain that it is titled "Beginning, August 1920" because that is the date of Billie Jo's birth, which she describes in the first poem. Model a fluent reading of the poem, being conscious of both the line breaks and the punctuation. Clarify any questions students have before they begin reading the book.

STORIA ENRICHMENTS

This Storia e-book has the following enrichments to enhance students' comprehension of the book.

- Word Twister
- Who Said It?
- Word Scramble (4)
- Do You Know?

Independent Reading Assign students to read *Out of the Dust* independently. Remind them to keep the big question in mind as they read.

Comprehension Focus

Analyze Theme *Out of the Dust* delivers a powerful message about forgiveness, hope, and healing through its sparse, poetic text. Guide students to do a deep reading of the text, making inferences and analyzing the theme. Remind students that the theme is a message about life or human nature that the author expresses through the character's actions and ideas.

Ask students to think deeply about the themes of the book for themselves and to decide what message the book gives them. Emphasize the importance of supporting their interpretation of the theme with specific evidence from the text.

Use **Resource #2: Analyze Theme** on page 9 to support students in examining the themes in *Out of the Dust*. Ask them to answer the questions on the resource as they read and discuss their responses with a partner. When they have finished the book, ask them to state the theme of the book in one or two sentences. Guide a discussion about theme with the group, encouraging students to offer their answers and to supply evidence from the book to support their ideas.

After You Read

Questions to Discuss

Lead students in a discussion of these focus story elements.

1. Historical Fiction 14-year-old Billie Jo tells this story. How does her point of view affect what you learn about life in the Dust Bowl? How would the story be different if an adult told it? (*Sample answers: Billie Jo tells about how she dreams of playing the piano, tests she has in school, and her friends. An adult might talk more about money and farming.*)

2. Analyze Theme How have Billie Jo and her father healed by the end of the book? How has the land begun to heal as well? (*Sample answer: Billy Jo has finally forgiven herself and her father; she has healed inside, as well as, outside. Her father has also*

healed from the bitterness of losing his wife and is courting another woman. The land has healed from the dust storm and there is a rebirth of growing things.)

3. Words from the Dust Bowl Use the words *drought*, *parched*, and *gaunt* to describe both the landscape of the Dust Bowl, Billie Jo, and her father. (*Answers will vary, but should be supported by word meanings and text evidence.*)

Questions to Share

Encourage students to share their responses with a partner or small group.

1. Text-to-Self If you were Billie Jo, would you get off the train to return home or would you stay on to find a new life?

2. Text-to-World The Dust Bowl was a natural disaster. What natural disasters have occurred recently? How did they affect people's lives?

3. Text-to-Text What other young characters have you read about who have faced desperate conditions for survival? Compare one of the characters to Billie Jo.

WORDS TO KNOW

Words from the Dust Bowl

Ask students to write sentences using the vocabulary word **bolded** in each question. Have volunteers share their sentences aloud.

1. How did **drought** affect people during the Dust Bowl?
2. What made the wheat look **withered**?
3. How was Billie Jo's father like the **sod**?
4. What did a **duster** look like as it came across the prairie?
5. What does Billie Jo mean when she says she saw the "**gaunt** of hunger in his cheeks"?

Ask students to ask and answer more questions about the vocabulary words, applying them to the novel or to their own lives.

Extension Activities

Reading/Writing Connection

Poetry to Prose *Out of the Dust* provides an opportunity to teach students about the differences in writing genres. Ask students to choose one of their favorite poems in the book. Then challenge them to rewrite it in the form of an expository text like a newspaper article or a narrative text like a diary entry. Help students to see the economy of poetry (the power of using few words) as they translate the genre into a prose form.

Don't forget the



BIG QUESTION

Critical Thinking Give each student an opportunity to answer the big question. Encourage students to support their answers with details and evidence from the text. Tell students there is more than one right answer.

How will Billie Jo come "out of the dust"?

Content Area Connections

History Letters to the White House Ask students to read letters that young people wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt during the Great Depression. They can find the letters by visiting: <http://bit.ly/TtcRZi>. Ask students to report back to the class by choosing a letter and reading it to the class. Then ask them to explain what it reveals about the times of the Great Depression.

Geography Dust Bowl States Ask students to research the geographic area of the US that was affected by the Dust Bowl. Guide them to do an image search on "Dust Bowl maps," to find several good maps of the affected areas and those hardest hit. Project a map of the United States on the whiteboard and have students draw in the states that were hit by the dust storms.

Science Causes of the Dust Bowl Have students research the causes of the Dust Bowl, which are attributed to detrimental farming practices and climatic shifts. Ask them to report on their findings, citing the sources they read and explaining the theories behind the natural disaster.

Art Photographs from the Dust Bowl Photographers working for the US government captured historic images of the Dust Bowl and the people it affected. Encourage students to examine these photographs on sites such as Wessel's Living History Farm, which includes interview

transcripts with people who lived through the Dust Bowl, as well as, photographs: <http://bit.ly/UzKGHQ>. Ask students to choose one photograph that they are especially drawn to and describe it to the class while projecting it on the whiteboard or a screen.

BIG ACTIVITY

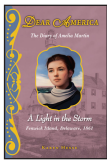
Free Verse Poem After students have read *Out of the Dust*, discuss things they notice and things they like about free verse. The book provides a wonderful example of the power of poetry to express deep feelings and meanings. Ask students to experiment with the form of free verse poetry to express something important in their lives by using the **Big Activity: Free Verse Poem**. Guide them through the following steps to create their poem:

1. Choose an experience from your life that has a special meaning to you.
2. Brainstorm words and phrases that capture the feeling of the experience.
3. Create a rhythm and shape for the poem that grows out of your feelings.
4. Use punctuation to guide the reader to stop and start at important places.
5. Write an ending line that emphasizes the theme of your poem.

READ MORE AND LEARN MORE

Use these books and other resources to expand your students' study of the book or theme.

Author Connections



Dear America: A Light in the Storm

Karen Hesse

Ages: 9–13

Grades: 4–7

Lexile Measure: 850L

Pages: 208

Guided Reading Level: T

It's 1861, the first year of the Civil War, and Amelia helps her family run a lighthouse off the coast of Delaware, a state wedged between the warring North and South. Her mother and father argue constantly about President Lincoln and much more. Meanwhile, inspired by the lighthouse she loves, Amelia comes to feel that she is the light of her family. Can she keep burning bright so that Father and Mother come back together? **Available as a Storia e-book**



Morbito 2: Guardian of the Darkness

Nahoko Uehashi

Ages: 11–13

Grades: 6–8

Lexile Measure: 830L

Pages: 272

Now an adult, Balsa must return to the capital she fled as a child to clear the name of her mentor, Jiguro, and unravel the mystery of her past. One secret from the past puts Balsa in mortal peril. She discovers that Jiguro was once a member of the king's royal guard, and when he escaped with Balsa, the king sent his guards out one by one to bring them back. Are the Guardians of the Dark still after her? By returning to the capital, is she walking right into their hands? **Available as a Storia e-book**

Theme Connections



Antarctica

Walter Dean Myers

Ages: 11–14

Grades: 6–8

Lexile Measure: 1100L

Pages: 144

Guided Reading Level: Y

Exploring the treacherous South Pole was never easy, but a few brave men, such as James Cook, Richard Byrd, and Ernest Shackleton, were determined to do it. The author describes their journeys in riveting detail while portraying the strength and courage it took to face such unforgiving conditions. **Available as a Storia e-book**



War Horse

Michael Morpurgo

Ages: 10–14

Grades: 5–8

Lexile Measure: 1090L

Pages: 192

Guided Reading Level: Z

Joey is a handsome red bay horse, loved by Albert, his 13-year-old master. When Albert's father sells Joey to the British Army, the horse is carried away by strangers, trained to serve in combat, and shipped to the battlefields of World War I. Hunger, cold, and the sound of great guns are no match for Joey's bravery and sense of compassion. He is certain that someday he will return home, even though he is captured by the enemy. Will Joey ever make it back to the farm and Albert? **Available as a Storia e-book**



The Healing Spell

Kimberly Griffiths Little

Ages: 10–14

Grades: 5–8

Lexile Measure: 800L

Pages: 368

Twelve-year-old Livie is living with a terrible secret: she caused the accident that left her Mamma in a coma. When Mamma comes home from the hospital, still in a coma, Livie is wracked by guilt. Can a mysterious faith healer with a magical box of spells help Livie make Mamma wake up again? Is a healing string Livie's last chance for forgiveness? **Available as a Storia e-book**



Circle of Secrets

Kimberley Griffiths Little

Ages: 10–14

Grades: 5–8

Lexile Measure: 800L

Pages: 336

Shelby has a pain in her heart that's been there ever since her mama, Mirage, left a year ago. When her daddy takes a job overseas, Shelby has to go live with Mirage till after Christmas. There's a blue-bottle tree in the Mirage's yard, which is supposed to trap spirits and keep things safe. Shelby thinks that a ghost may be leaving messages in the bottles. Now, Shelby needs Mirage more than ever, and it seems like forgiveness is the real key to putting everyone's ghosts to rest. **Available as a Storia e-book**

To find PDF versions of the Storia teacher guides and links to purchase the related books, visit:
<http://teacher.scholastic.com/ereading-resources/>

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Name: _____ Date: _____

RESOURCE #2: Analyze Theme

Answer these questions as you read to analyze the theme of the book. Provide evidence from the text to support each of your answers.

"Beginning: August 1920" (pp. 3–5)

1. How does Billie Jo think her father feels about her being born a girl?

"Blame" (pp. 70–72)

2. What does Billie Jo think about the accident? How does she feel about herself? How does she feel about her father right after the accident?

"Outlined by Dust" (pp. 111–114)

3. What mixed feelings does Billie Joe have for her father? How does he treat her?

"Midnight Truth" (pp. 195–196)

4. What are Billie Jo's feelings about her father now? What does she plan to do about it?

"Cut it Deep" (pp. 209–211)

5. How have Billie Jo's feelings toward her father changed? How have her feelings about herself changed?

What do you think is the theme or message about life in *Out of the Dust*?
