**Reviews of *Out of the Dust***

***Review 1***

Beautifully Sad

February 20, 2012

Overall rating

5.0

Writing Style

5.0

Illustrations/Photos (if applicable)

N/A

Learning Value

5.0

I want to teach this book so that I know that people are reading it. I've avoided OUT OF THE DUST for awhile, mostly because of the boring cover (I'm that girl) and that it won the Newbery Medal in 1998 and I don't usually love Newbery winners (I'm that girl, too.) When I started researching novels in verse, Karen Hesse's classic kept coming up. I tried it out and am so glad I did. OUT OF THE DUST sticks with you.  
  
Billie Jo Kelby and her family live in Oklahoma during the dust bowl years of the Great Depression. People are starving, farms are folding, and many are fleeing west to escape the poverty of the Dust Bowl. After three years without a strong crop, the Kelby's economic situation continues to deteriorate. When a horrific tragedy strikes (I gasped. Anyone who has read this book knows the scene I am talking about.), they are emotionally and physically destroyed.  
  
Grit is the word that comes to mind. Billie Jo has the grit to continue on after her world has been shattered. Her bravery and resilience are moving; I wanted to scoop her up and comfort her. Grit also has a literal meaning in the novel, with dust infiltrating every aspect of their lives. I never thought about having to keep glasses and dishes turned over while setting the table, nor what it was like for students to take a test in a dust storm. Hesse's imagery works the dust into the reader's mind until they, like Billie Jo, just want to escape to a cleaner, happier place.  
  
Out of the Dust is impossibly sad, which is why the free verse format works so well. The reader is able to move through the book at a quick enough pace that the events aren't too depressing. Plus, the spare writing is a perfect fit for the setting, flowery prose just wouldn't work on an Oklahoma farm where there are never enough hours in a day.  
  
Billie Jo's story will remain with me and has given my understanding of the Great Depression a new, more personal, dimension.

Good Points

Beautifully written  
Sad in the best possible way  
A surprising ending

***Review 2***

**Plot Summary**

Out of the Dust, by [Karen Hesse](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen_Hesse), is a historical fiction novel.  Historical fiction is defined as stories whose realistic settings, characters, and events reconstruct life in the past as stated by Literature and the Child. This novel won the [John Newberry Medal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newbery_Medal) Award in 1998. Hesse wrote this novel in a very unique way, she chose to tell the story in free-verse poetry.

                This novel takes place in Oklahoma around 1934-1935 about the struggles families in Joyce City faced surrounding the dust bowls. Billie Jo, a thirteen year old girl, faces many challenges throughout this book surrounding herself and her family. Early in the story we find out that Billie Jo’s father is a farmer, but his crops have yet to grow because the drought is so bad. However, he never gives up hope that one day the rain will fall, and there will be plenty of wheat to sell.  Her mother on the hand, tries to get Billie Jo’s father to plant different crops that would survive in dry conditions, but he is relentless and does not listen. Billie Jo is constantly wishing and hoping to make a better life for herself. She is a gifted piano player and is given the opportunity to travel around with other aspiring performers in her town.  She looks for support and encouragement from her mother, but never truly gets what she is looking for. Piano playing for Billie Jo is in escape; it’s a way to forget about the dust and the hard times she faces at home. However, one horrific accident ruins Billie Jo’s chances of ever escaping. One day her father leaves a pail of kerosene on the stove. While her mother is making coffee she mistakenly pours the kerosene thinking its water, and it starts a fire. Her mother runs outside to get her dad and a startled Billie Jo gets the pail and goes to throw it outside.  Just as she is going to throw the pail outside her mother is walking back inside towards her and meets the flames of the kerosene. Billie Jo flies on top of her mother trying to put the flames out with her hands and severely burns them.  A line from one of the poems after the accident says, “At first I felt no pain only heat.” This gives readers a chance to really feel how Billie Jo is feeling at the time. She is sad and upset with herself that she harmed her mother and her baby brother.

After the accident, Billie Jo’s mother lays bed ridden for a few months until she and baby Franklin end up dying.  This gives the story a new turn and changes the relationship between Billie Jo in her father. The poems that follow the accident express her sorrow and desperation to escape Joyce City, but she can no longer play the piano without it being too painful. As time goes on, Billie Jo and her father move further apart and the dust storms never seem to stop.  A few times Billie Jo tries to play the piano regardless of the pain she feels, but she knows it will never be the same again.  Towards the end of the story Billie Jo decides she can no longer take it and wants to leave. In of the poems, entitled Midnight Truth, Billie Jo expresses her grief towards her father,

*“I have given my father so many chances to understand, to reach out, to love me. He once did.*

*Now there’s nothing easy between us.*

*Sometimes he takes notice of me, like coming after me in the dust.*

*Bust mostly I’m invisible. Mostly I’m alone”(195).*

 Billie Jo attempts to run away and while on a train she meets another run away, an older man who has left his wife and two children.  The man felt worthless because he couldn’t provide for his family anymore so he just left. She tells him the story of Ma and her baby brother, and talks about her relationship with her father. It is in this conversation that Billie Jo realizes she shouldn’t have just up and left her father, especially when he has stood by her through these tough times. She decides to go back home and mend things with her father. Once back at home, things start to finally get back in order; Billie Jo’s relationship with her father is growing, she is able to play piano more, and a new women enters their lives who helps the dynamics of the family. Louise is a new woman that her father met while taking night classes after the drought seemed like it was never going to end.  She is a kind woman and Billie Jo likes her because she knows how to respect ones home while still making it her own. At the end of the novel, Billie Jo really starts to like Louise and hopes that she will live with her and her father.

**Textual Elements**

As discussed in the section before this, the plot of this novel is about thirteen year old Billie Jo and her family as they struggle to make a living in a dust bowl era. The setting takes place in Joyce City, Oklahoma in 1934-1935. The main characters are Billie Jo, her father, mother, Louise, Arley Wanderdale, Mad Dog, and other various members of the community. This story gives its readers an insight to what it was like in that time era. In one part in the novel, Billie Jo enters a talent show competition to hopefully make her father proud of her and win some money to help him financially. The prize money is three dollars for first prize, two for second, and one for third. This gives readers the sense of what life was like and how simplicity made everyone happy. They didn’t need hundreds of dollars to make ends meet, a mere one dollar was enough to help contribute at that time.

This novel is attention-grabbing because of the way in which it is written. Karen Hesse wrote this book in free verse poetry. The [free verse poetry](http://www.answers.com/topic/free-verse) allows young adult readers to get into the book without being overwhelmed by too much text. It is a very simplistic novel in the sense that it is an effortless read while still having sufficient content. Each of the poems has a different title and gives the readers a clue to what to expect next.  Another aspect of this book that is very interesting is that it is broken up into the different seasons; winter, spring, summer, and fall.  The tones of poems are reflective of the weather during that particular season. For example, one of the poems which is in the Spring of 1934 is entitled” Apples” and talks about Billie Jo’s  ma’s apple tree and the blossoms are beginning to bloom.   The novel is told from the first person point of view, and narrated from the main character Billie Jo.  Readers will be able to relate to her character because at this age many young adults want to escape from their lives and feel they need a change.

**Analysis and Critique**

This novel is very uplifting and truly gives readers an insight to the lives of people around the dust bowl era. Although the main character struggles to escape she finds that her place is at home. Readers will be able to get a sense of what the character is truly feeling in this novel. These poems almost represent a diary of her life, where she exposes her thoughts and fears. Billie Jo is a very relatable character in the sense that many young teenagers may be feeling the way she does throughout the book pertaining to the different issues that arise. Some issues she overcomes in the story that I would think young readers could relate to are, the loss of her mother, and trying to achieve success and manage the pressure she faces from that talent that she highly excels in.   The attitude towards the end of the novel is very ambitious and hopeful, two things many readers can also relate too because everyone knows the only way to make things better is to be hopeful for tomorrow because it usually brings a brighter day, and like Billie Jo you should never give up regardless of how hard live seems. When things seem like they will never be the same again life has a funny way of surprising you just as it did for Billie Jo.