

About Karen Hesse



"I feel so fortunate that I have a job that encourages me to read and discover new things."

—Karen Hesse

Karen Hesse was not a happy, carefree kid. She was always upset about something. "My mother tells me there never was a more miserable child," Hesse admits.

How does a child like that turn into a famous, award-winning author? Karen Hesse is as unique and colorful as the characters in her books.

Karen Hesse was born on August 29, 1952, in Baltimore, Maryland. Growing up, she had a very active imagination. Hesse would sometimes imagine things that were so scary she had trouble sleeping at night. When she went shopping with her mother as a young child, she would see the clothes on the racks reaching for her. Even dinner could sometimes upset Karen. She hated Chinese food so much that she would whine all the way through family dinners at Mee Jon Lows, a local Chinese restaurant. (She learned to like Chinese food as an adult, though!)

There were happy times, too. Hesse enjoyed writing poetry and playing with the many kids who lived in her neighborhood. She especially loved spending time with her big brother, Mark. When she wanted time alone, Hesse would curl up with a good book—make that *climb* up with a good book. Hesse would walk out her back door, book in hand, and climb an apple tree. “There, cradled in the boughs of the tree, I spent hours reading. Often my bony bottom would go numb, but I loved it up there so much, I ignored the discomfort.”

Hesse remembers being awkward as a child, with “long skinny legs, buckteeth, tons of freckles, enormous green eyes, and a mop of brown curls. I seemed to be all angles and bones through elementary school.” She didn’t like big groups and didn’t need to be the center of attention. “As a child, I usually faded into the background. I liked being unnoticed.”

When her stepsister entered her life, things changed for Hesse. Her stepsister was beautiful and became a professional dancer while still in high school. Hesse was jealous. She decided to try acting so people would notice her, too. Her high school drama teacher was impressed with her talent and helped Hesse get into the theater program at Towson State College in Maryland.

“So why am I a writer and not an actress?” Hesse has asked. “One day, as I prepared to run lights for a student production in the studio theater, a young man came up to the light booth. A mutual friend introduced us. It was love at first sight. For both of us.”

Hesse left school and was married in 1971. She later finished her college education at the University of Maryland. She spent some of her free time at the school writing poetry and giving poetry readings. She also held many kinds of jobs. She worked in a pizza bagel shop, as a nanny, and in a library at her university. The library work was her favorite. "Working in a library, well, I loved that the way I love chocolate pudding. It was truly that good," Hesse has shared.

From that point on, almost all of Hesse's jobs had something to do with reading. She worked as a proofreader, as an advertising secretary at a magazine, and as a typesetter. It was while working with children's books as a typesetter that she first began to believe that she could become a children's-book author.

In 1976, Hesse and her husband, Randy, settled in Vermont. There they raised their two daughters, Kate and Rachel. Hesse loved being a mom, but she never lost her interest in writing for children. In fact, reading to her young daughters made her want to write even more.

Becoming an author wasn't easy. Hesse began writing books for children in 1980, but she had trouble finding a publisher. "There were nine years when I submitted work and received not one acceptance. I think a less stubborn person would've given up!" she has admitted. But Hesse didn't give up. Her first book, *Wish on a Unicorn*, was published in 1991. Since then, she has published more than a dozen books and received many awards. With such great success, Karen Hesse is certainly not miserable anymore!

How *Out of the Dust* Came About



"But how could I re-create the dust bowl? I was born in 1952, in Baltimore, Maryland. What did I know from dust?"

—Karen Hesse, excerpt from Newbery acceptance speech, June 27, 1998

In 1993, Karen Hesse and her friend Liza Ketchum took a car trip to Colorado. On the way there, they traveled through Kansas. Hesse had never been to this part of the United States before. Seeing the Great Plains for the first time was an amazing experience for her. A tornado struck on her first day in Kansas. On her second day, she visited a town so small that it was never given a name. Hesse remembers that day: "The wind never stopped blowing there. It caressed our faces, it whispered in our ears. The grass moved like a corps of dancers. The colors were unlike any I had ever encountered on the East Coast or the West. And the sky and land went on to the horizon and beyond."

Hesse's visit to Kansas stayed with her. Three years later, her memories of the Plains found a place in her writing. Hesse was working on her picture book, *Come On, Rain!* She shared her work with her writing group and asked them what they thought. The three authors who make up her writing group spoke

honestly. They didn't understand why the character in her book wanted rain so much.

"I started thinking about times in this country when people really wanted it to rain. So I came back to the Dust Bowl," recalls Hesse. "Being the writer I am, when I started thinking about the Dust Bowl, I started researching. I became so fascinated by that period of history and the people living then that I put the picture book aside and began writing *Out of the Dust*."

Hesse researched and researched and researched. She had never lived in Oklahoma or during the 1930s and wanted to make sure she had all the details just right. She read books about wheat farming. She read books about dust. She even contacted the Oklahoma Historical Society for help. "I saturated myself with those dusty, dirty, desperate times, and what I discovered thrilled me," Hesse has explained. Hesse's most useful discovery was the *Boise City News*, a newspaper published in the Oklahoma Panhandle in the 1930s.

As Hesse pored over the issues of the *Boise City News*, she was surprised by what she found. "The dust storms were only minor articles—what was going on there was life! There were concerts and plays and schools. . . . So I made Billie Jo connected to the arts, because I wanted the reader to understand that even if people were struggling under such harsh circumstances, they would find a way to keep joy in their lives."

Hesse has admitted she had personal reasons for making Billie Jo a poet and a pianist. "I'm both a poet and a musician—

although I'm not very good at either, I'm afraid!" Hesse enjoys music so much that she has said that if she weren't a writer, she'd be a musician. She'd love to conduct beautiful symphonies.

Hesse gave Billie Jo's character a love of music, but she decided to make Billie Jo's character face terrible tragedy, too. She is often asked whether the accident in *Out of the Dust* could have actually taken place. Could someone really confuse kerosene and water? "Yes. It happened often," Hesse has answered. "I based the accident on a series of articles appearing in the 1934 *Boise City News*. That particular family tragedy planted the seed for *Out of the Dust*, as much as the dust storms did."

Was all of the research and hard work worth it? You bet. *Out of the Dust* won many awards, including the John Newbery Medal, and helped make Karen Hesse a famous writer. But don't look for a sequel. Hesse has been asked to write sequels to many of her books, but has always said no. She finds creating brand-new characters and fresh stories more interesting.

An Interview with Karen Hesse



About *Out of the Dust*

*Did you interview people who lived during the Dust Bowl when you were researching *Out of the Dust*?*

No. The intimate details of life in the Oklahoma Panhandle during the 1930s came almost exclusively from scouring reels and reels of newspaper on microfilm.

*The entries in *Out of the Dust* are dated as if Billie Jo wrote them in a journal. Have you ever kept a journal?*

Yes.

*You must have done a lot of research about plants and farming in order to write *Out of the Dust*. Your descriptions of the wheat crops, Ma's apple trees, and Mrs. Brown's cactus plant are wonderfully detailed! Have you tried gardening or farming yourself?*

My gardening skills leave a great deal to be desired. However, the germination of a tiny seed, its growth into a mature plant, fascinates me. Such a miracle. I watch my husband, who is the

true gardener in the family. He tends the garden the way I tend the words in my books. He sees the plant weeds when I do not. I see the word weeds when others read right past them. So perhaps I am a gardener—my medium, though, is words and concepts rather than seeds and dirt.

About being a writer

What's the most challenging part of being a writer?

Life places so many obstacles in the path of a writer. It is difficult to stay on task at times, particularly when the work is not going well. Or when something distracting turns my thoughts away from the computer. Perhaps my dog is ill, or my washing machine is overflowing, or a tragedy has unbalanced the nation. I must admit that many times I take care of those demands first and momentarily put my work aside. Or there are times when I want to simply engage in life, rather than taking the measure of every little detail that rushes past me and placing it in a brain file for later use in a book. Or I can get so wrapped up in my research that I don't know how to stop reading. Or I will saturate my brain with so much information but I don't know how to start writing. All of these challenges, and more, complicate the process of writing a book.

What's the best part?

When I'm writing I feel more alive, more complete, than at any other time. When I'm writing I have a sense of everything being

right in the world, even if terrible things are happening to the characters in my created world and terrible things are happening to people in the real world. Inside me everything is in place and functioning as it was meant to function. It's hard to describe. It's glorious to experience.

When you have finished writing one of your books, who gets to read it first?

Let's talk instead about drafts rather than finished books. When I finish writing a draft, the first reader is determined by the kind of book I'm trying to write. For example, my daughter Rachel understands me well; she also understands children's literature. If I am taking risks, if I am creating a sort of high-wire act with a story, I will give an early draft to Rachel to see if I'm making any sense at all. My writing group also gets an early look. They often see the manuscript two or three times during the years of revisions. My editor, of course, reads the manuscript at several stages in its development, and my husband and my daughter Kate read the final drafts. If I need expert readers (and I often do), they read the manuscript in its earlier stages so that if I am heading down the wrong path they can correct me before I've invested too much time exploring a dead end.

Which do you enjoy more: doing research for a book or actually writing it?

It's hard to say. Finding the resources feels much like going on a scavenger hunt. Tracking down references, holding them in my

hands, diving into them . . . that is so rewarding, so satisfying, so much fun. Learning about my subject, becoming a Sunday-night expert in a wide array of new fields keeps me excited and engaged, though it makes me an odd dinner companion as I offer obscure little factoids whenever there is a lull in the conversation. However, when I'm writing and the writing is going well, ahhh, those are the best times, the golden times. I suppose, if I had to choose, it would be the actual writing I love the most.

Do you ever work on more than one book at a time?

Yes. As one book is approaching final stage, another is usually in midstage revisions, another in early draft or late research, and another is a little seed, restless under the soil, waiting impatiently for conditions to be just right for germination.

Have you ever started writing a book and not finished it?

Definitely. Though it doesn't happen often, I can reach the writing stage and find I don't care enough about the characters, or the book. No matter how many changes, the manuscript will never be of a quality my readers deserve. In the case of *Just Juice*, Juice was a secondary character in another, entirely different novel. I didn't feel that novel was strong enough and so I withdrew it from my publisher. However, Juice wouldn't be put off. Happily I made her the star of a spin-off show, and the resulting book justified every hour I'd spent on the original story.

Your book A Light in the Storm was made into a play through the Kennedy Center's Imagination Celebration on Tour program. What was it like to see one of your books performed onstage?

It is thrilling to see the internal geography of your book, the characters, the setting, the plot, unfold externally on the stage. Dressed in its theatrical costume, the story is transformed into something beyond its original conception. It is very powerful, very moving for me as the author to see the product of my imagination brought to life.

Are there plans for any of your other books to be made into plays or movies?

There has been much discussion, much negotiation, but no deal.

Your grandfather was supposed to be a passenger on the Titanic but he sold his ticket and took the next boat. That's an amazing story. Have you ever thought of writing about it?

Yes, but I couldn't find my way into the story. The research led me to write *Letters from Rifka* instead.

General

If you had more free time, how would you spend it?

Reading for pleasure.

You have said that if you were not a writer, you'd like to be a musician. What kind of music do you like? Do you play any instruments?

I like many kinds of music: classical, jazz, folk, rock, blues. I sing in a chorus (my voice has a very narrow range but I LOVE to sing and blend my reedy alto with other voices). I play the piano and the recorder very poorly, but when I am engaged in making music the writer in me is disengaged, and it's delicious to have a vacation from her.

Apart from writing, what are you best at?

I like to help people by hearing them, really hearing them. I'm best at being quietly present.

What are you bad at?

Too many things to list.