

Chapter Charter: Questions to Guide Your Reading



The following questions will help you think about the important parts of each chapter.

Winter 1934

- Why did Daddy name his daughter Billie Jo? How might Billie Jo's life be different if she were a boy?
- How does Billie Jo feel about Livie Killian's moving away? Have you ever had a friend move away? How did it feel?
- Do you think Billie Jo should be mad at Ma for not allowing her to miss school to play piano? Why or why not?
- How does Ma respond to Billie Jo's scores on the state test? Did you ever feel you deserved more praise from your family than you got?

Spring 1934

- What does Billie Jo do for comfort? Is there something you like to do when you're upset or want to relax?
- Why does Ma allow Billie Jo to play with Arley Wanderdale on the road?
- Have you ever performed in a concert or play or had people watch you play in a big game? How did it feel to have an audience?
- If you were Daddy, would you "give up on wheat"? Why does he decide to keep growing it?

Summer 1934

- Whose fault is the accident?
- Should Billie Jo forgive her father for leaving Ma to go drinking in Guymon?
- How does Billie Jo spend her birthday?
- Why does Billie Jo hide her injured hands from her father?
- Why does Daddy want to dig a pond now?

Autumn 1934

- Why can't Billie Jo stand to be in the same room with a piano anymore?
- How does Mad Dog treat Billie Jo? What would you say to Billie Jo if she were your friend?
- What kinds of paintings are shown at the art exhibit? Why do they mean so much to Billie Jo?

Winter 1935

- Billie Jo writes that Christmas without Ma and Franklin "wouldn't have been so bad, / if I'd just remembered the cranberry sauce." Does your family make any special foods for a holiday celebration? How would the holiday feel without them?
- In what ways is Billie Jo like her father? Who are you the most like in your family?
- Is it right for Miss Freeland to let Buddy Williams and his family stay at the school?
- After the Williamses' baby is born, Billie Jo feels she must "go away for a little while / and just walk off the feelings." What kinds of feelings do you think she's experiencing?
- Do you think Billie Jo deserved to win third place at the talent show?

Spring 1935

- How does Billie Jo feel about Mad Dog Craddock? How do you know?
- Why is Billie Jo upset with her father about the letter from Aunt Ellis? How would you feel if you were Billie Jo?
- Do you think Daddy is being a good father to Billie Jo? Why or why not?

Summer 1935

- If you were Billie Jo, would you have run away?
- How does Billie Jo's father compare with the man she meets in the boxcar of the train?
- Why do you think Billie Jo is able to call her father Daddy for the first time since her mother died?

Autumn 1935

- How do you know that Billie Jo has accepted Louise?
- Does anything on Billie Jo's Thanksgiving List surprise you?
- What do you think will happen to Billie Jo, Daddy, and Louise?




Plot: What's Happening?

"Hard times are about losing spirit,
and hope,
and what happens when dreams dry up."

—*Out of the Dust*

Out of the Dust tells the story of Billie Jo Kelby, a thirteen-year-old girl who lives on a family farm in Oklahoma. The story begins in winter 1934, a time when dust storms are destroying crops and making it difficult for families in Oklahoma and other southwestern states to earn enough to survive.

Even though her family is struggling, Billie Jo is full of hope. She is excited to find out that Ma is expecting a new baby. Then there's more happy news. Arley Wanderdale, a local musician and music teacher, asks her to play piano at the Palace Theatre. Billie Jo loves playing piano and wants to perform—even though her rival, Mad Dog Craddock, was asked to play, too. Billie Jo describes her performance, saying, "It's the best / I've ever felt, / playing hot piano. . . ." Billie Jo is thrilled when Ma gives her permission to travel with Arley Wanderdale to play piano during the summer.



Just when Billie Jo is finding happiness in her dusty world, her family is torn apart in a terrible tragedy. While making Daddy's coffee, Ma picks up a bucket that Daddy had placed next to the stove. Instead of water, the bucket holds kerosene, and a fire breaks out. Ma runs outside to tell Daddy. Billie Jo follows, then remembers the fiery bucket inside. She grabs it and throws the kerosene out the door, not realizing that Ma is standing there. Ma becomes a "column of fire." When Billie Jo tries to beat out the flames to save Ma, her hands are burned badly. Ma dies a few days later after giving birth to a son named Franklin.

As the weeks pass, Billie Jo and Daddy have difficulty adjusting. Arley Wanderdale encourages Billie Jo to play piano again. He invites her to play at a dance revue that his wife, Vera, is putting together. Billie Jo says she'll try.

Billie Jo practices on the school piano every day before and after class to prepare for a talent contest at the Palace Theatre. Her hard work is rewarded when she wins third place at the contest. Some contestants say the judges were only being kind to Billie Jo because of her injuries. But Billie Jo isn't bothered by what others have to say or by the pain she feels after playing with all her might. "I ignored the pain running up and down my arms, / I felt like I was part of something grand."

Arley asks Billie Jo to play in a show at the school. But when the time comes, Billie Jo's hands still hurt from her performance at the Palace and the show goes badly for her. She says, "I did play like a cripple at Arley's show, / not that Arley would ever say it." She doesn't think Arley will ask her to play again.

As the days pass, Billie Jo grows restless. She says her father and she “can’t soothe each other.” Billie Jo also notices that Daddy is developing spots on his skin like the ones that killed his father—skin cancer. Aunt Ellis writes and invites Billie Jo to live with her in Lubbock, Texas. This only adds to her troubles. Billie Jo doesn’t want to go and is confused when her father says, “Let’s wait and see.”

Things keep going badly for the Kelbys. Daddy’s wheat crops are poor and the family has little money. Billie Jo is invited to play piano at graduation, but when her turn comes she just stares at the keys and can’t play. She is also troubled because her father won’t see a doctor about his spots. “I think we’re both turning to dust,” she says.

As summer 1935 begins, Billie Jo is so filled with anger and sadness that she decides to stow away in the boxcar of a train heading west, “out of the dust.” Two days into her journey, a man climbs into Billie Jo’s boxcar. She gives him her day’s biscuits and they share stories about their lives. Billie Jo says, “I told him about my father /and how the thing that scared us both the most /was being left alone. / . . . My father /stayed rooted, even with my tests and my temper, /even with the double sorrow of / his grief and my own, /he had kept a home /until I broke it.”

Billie Jo drifts off to sleep. When she awakens, the man and all of her biscuits are gone. Billie Jo decides to get off the train in Flagstaff, Arizona, and calls Mr. Hardly so he can tell her father that she’s coming home.

Daddy meets Billie Jo at the train station. As they walk home, he promises to go see Doc Rice. Billie Jo tells the reader that she is learning to forgive her father and herself for all that they have faced.

Doc Rice cuts the cancer out of Daddy's skin and examines Billie Jo's hands. He tells Billie Jo that ointment will help, but most of all she needs to use them.

Daddy's friend Louise comes to dinner. Louise stayed with Daddy while Billie Jo was away. Billie Jo admits, "I didn't intend to, but I liked her. . . ." A few weeks later, Daddy takes Louise to Ma and Franklin's grave to tell Ma his plan. He wants to marry Louise.

Louise helps Daddy get a second mule as an engagement gift. He will work the land with mules because the tractor is broken and there's no money to fix it. He's also going to plant different kinds of crops. He says that "you can stay in one place /and still grow."

Thinking about the plot

- Why does Billie Jo want to get "out of the dust"? What makes her decide to stay?
- How does Billie Jo's relationship with her father change during the novel?
- Do you think *Out of the Dust* has a happy ending? Why or why not?