

## Setting/Place and Time: Where in the World Are We?




"Dust  
piles up like snow  
across the prairie,  
dunes leaning against fences,  
mountains of dust pushing over barns."

—*Out of the Dust*

**O***ut of the Dust* is set in the Oklahoma Panhandle between January 1934 and December 1935. Overused land, endless days without rain, strong winds, and record high temperatures have led to violent dust storms there. The storms have blown away acres of topsoil, destroyed crops, and killed livestock. Gone are the plentiful fields of waist-high golden wheat that used to grow. The dust storms have become so bad that the places they strike—Oklahoma, Colorado, Texas, Kansas, and New Mexico—are nicknamed the Dust Bowl.

### **Place: Where are we?**

Billie Jo Kelby lives on a farm in Cimarron County, Oklahoma. Cimarron County is a real place. So are Texhoma, Guymon, and the other towns described in *Out of the Dust*. Most of them can be found in the Oklahoma Panhandle. If you're not sure where the



Panhandle is, you can look at a map of Oklahoma. You'll see that the state looks something like a rectangle with a long, narrow strip attached to its top left side. That narrow strip is the Panhandle.

When you read *Out of the Dust*, you can imagine what it was like to live in the Oklahoma Panhandle in the mid-1930s. You can see, feel, and even taste the dust. Dust is always with Billie Jo. It covers her food and dinner table. It layers the floors and furniture of her home. Dust even blows into Billie Jo's school during an important test. "While we sat / taking our six-weeks test, / the wind rose / and the sand blew / right through the cracks in the schoolhouse wall. . . ."

Some of the dust storms are so bad that cars and trucks stop running and people get lost trying to find shelter. Billie Jo tells of one particularly frightening dust storm in the entry called "Blankets of Black." The storm she describes actually happened on April 14, 1935. One of the worst storms of the Dust Bowl, its date became known as Black Sunday.

Dust isn't the only hardship facing Oklahomans in the 1930s. Hungry jackrabbits and grasshoppers add to their troubles. They eat the few crops that do manage to grow.

### **Time: When does our story happen?**

*Out of the Dust* begins in January 1934, in the middle of the Great Depression. The Great Depression started when the stock market crashed in October 1929 and continued throughout the

1930s. It was a time in United States history when wages were very low and many people had no work at all. People struggled to meet everyday needs.

Bountiful wheat crops protected Oklahoma farmers from the Great Depression at first. But after 1931, the wheat crops failed. The crops could not survive the dust storms and hailstorms. Families came upon hard times.

Like most families in the United States in the 1930s, Billie Jo's family is very poor. Karen Hesse helps us understand just how poor the Kelbys are through her descriptions of the family. Ma sews a nightie for the new baby out of a feed sack rather than softer, more expensive material. Billie Jo wears tattered clothes. "I slipped the coins into my sweater pocket, the pocket /without the hole. . . ."

The Kelbys have far worse troubles. Billie Jo's father is having a hard time earning money to pay the bills and keep his farm going. He is forced to take loans from the government in order to have enough money to plant more wheat. Sometimes Ma and Daddy quarrel over what to do. "Ma says, /'Who pays the bills?'/ 'No one right now,' Daddy says."

At this time, many families chose to leave the Dust Bowl in search of better lives. "And so they go, / fleeing the blowing dust, / fleeing the fields of brown-tipped wheat / barely ankle high, /and sparse as the hair on a dog's belly." Two-and-a-half million people moved out of the Plains states during the Great Depression. Many of these families traveled to California as Livie

Killian's family did. They often found their new lives in California to be just as hard as the ones they had left. They picked crops for very low wages and lived in poor shacks or crowded camps. Families who moved around and did seasonal work like picking crops were called migrants.

The 1930s were especially hard on young adults. They had the greatest difficulty finding work. Times got so tough that at the peak of the Depression, nearly a quarter of a million teenagers were riding the rails. "Riding the rails" means they would stow away on train cars and travel from place to place in search of work, food, or adventure. Many found none of those things. In *Out of the Dust*, Billie Jo rides the rails when she runs away.

By late 1935, when the novel ends, the Depression and the dust storms are still going strong, but Billie Jo is hopeful. "And as long as the /dust doesn't crush /the winter wheat, /we'll have something to show in the spring /for all Daddy's hard work. /Not a lot, but more than last year." Dust Bowl farmers would not have a good crop again until 1939.

### **Thinking about the setting**

- What do you think it was like to live in Oklahoma in the 1930s? What do you think the worst part would be? What would be the best part?
- How would it feel to experience a dust storm? What is the worst storm that you have been through? How do you think a dust storm compares?

## Themes/Layers of Meaning: Is That What It *Really* Means?



"Just as Billie Jo forgave Ma. Just as Billie Jo forgave Daddy. Just as Billie Jo forgave herself. And with that forgiveness Billie Jo finally set her roots and turned toward her future."

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

**A** novel's themes are its important ideas. *Out of the Dust* has three main themes: forgiveness, healing, and community.

### **Forgiveness**

Sometimes even the people we love can make us angry. Nobody knows that better than Billie Jo Kelby. She adores Ma and always obeys her rules. But there are times when Ma's rules seem unfair. When Ma won't let Billie Jo miss school to play piano, Billie Jo is furious. As soon as Ma's back is turned, Billie Jo gives her a look that is "foul as maggoty stew." Later, when Billie Jo gets a top score on the state tests, Ma doesn't make a fuss. All she says is, "I knew you could." Billie Jo knows Ma is proud but wishes she would show it.

Even though Ma can make Billie Jo angry sometimes, it is nothing like the anger she feels after the fire in the kitchen. Billie Jo is mad at Daddy, at herself, and even at the land. She must learn to forgive before she can find hope and happiness again.

### **Forgiving family**

After Ma and baby Franklin die in the accident, Billie Jo and Daddy are the only ones left in the Kelby home. Instead of helping each other through the very sad time, Billie Jo and her father barely speak. Billie Jo says, "I don't know my father anymore. . . /I am awkward with him, /and irritated, /and I want to be alone /but I am terrified of being alone."

Billie Jo is full of anger toward her father. She blames him for putting kerosene next to the stove. It was the kerosene that caused the fire that killed Ma. She is also mad at her father for using the family's emergency money to buy drinks at a bar in Guymon while Ma was suffering from her burns.

Billie Jo cannot find it in her heart to forgive her father. She says, "I can almost forgive him the taking of Ma's money, /I can almost forgive him his night in Guymon, /getting drunk. / But as long as I live, / no matter how big a hole he digs, /I can't forgive him that pail of kerosene. . . ."

As time passes, Billie Jo's feelings only get stronger. She gets angry with Daddy for not knowing Mad Dog Craddock's real name: "Ma could have told me." She doesn't like Daddy going to night school and "spending time with all those biddies," either. Worst of all, she hates that her father won't respond to Aunt

Ellis's letter. Aunt Ellis wants Billie Jo to live with her in Texas even though Billie Jo doesn't want to go.

Daddy isn't the only person making Billie Jo mad. She is mad at herself, too. She feels guilty about the fire. When the neighbors talk about what happened, Billie Jo gets very upset. "‘Billie Jo threw the pail,’ / they said. ‘An accident,’ / they said. / Under their words a finger pointed." Billie Jo is sensitive to what the ladies have to say because she hasn't forgiven herself for what happened to her mother and Franklin—even though it was an accident.

Billie Jo wishes someone were there to take care of her and make her feel better. She longs for her mother. In her longing, she finds a way to understand Ma and forgive her for the times she seemed too tough. Billie Jo explains, ". . . no matter how brittle and sharp she seemed, / she was still my ma who loved me."

Yet nothing can make Billie Jo forgive her father. Billie Jo is so full of sadness and anger that she decides to run away. She says, "I have given my father so many chances / to understand, to / reach out, to / love me."

When Billie Jo runs away, she spends a lot of time thinking about what happened to her family. She even discusses Daddy with a man she meets in a train boxcar. "I told him about my father, / and how the thing that scared us both the most / was being left alone. / And now I'd gone and left him." Billie Jo begins to understand that her father had been there for her all along.

“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 decides to return home. When her father meets her at the station, she is able to call him Daddy for the first time since the accident. She is also able to talk to him and share her feelings. As she opens up to Daddy, she begins to forgive him—and herself. “As we walk together, /side by side, /in the swell of dust, /I am forgiving him, step by step, /for the pail of kerosene. /  
As we walk together, /side by side, /in the sole-deep dust, /I am forgiving myself /for all the rest.”

Once Billie Jo forgives herself and her family, she is able to stop living in the sad memories of the past and look to the future with new hope.

### **Forgiving the land**

Sometimes weather can be dangerous and cause great damage. Have you ever had a hurricane, tornado, drought, or blizzard hit your town? These disasters can be so bad that they destroy homes or hurt innocent people. It can make you angry just thinking about it.

Billie Jo and her father are angry about the weather they face. Rain seldom falls. Dust storm follows dust storm. Crops dry up. Cattle grow thin. Many people move away because they can no longer rely on the land to feed their families.

Sometimes, rain or snow falls. One night Billie Jo hears rain falling. "I hear the first drops. / Like the tapping of a stranger / at the door of a dream, / the rain changes everything." But soon the rain is followed by yet another dust storm.

Daddy's wheat crop fails year after year. Each dust storm is harder for Billie Jo to accept. "I can hardly make myself / get started cleaning again." To make things worse, Billie Jo and her father know that people are partly to blame for the problems with the land. Farmers in Oklahoma and nearby states had cleared too much land and planted too much wheat. When the wheat crops began to fail, the topsoil blew away because the farmers had plowed away the sod that had kept the soil in place.

Billie Jo runs away to get "out of the dust." Daddy is so troubled by the land that Billie Jo believes he has given up. He won't even let the doctor treat his skin cancer.

However, just as Billie Jo is able to forgive herself and her family, she and Daddy slowly learn to forgive the land and the dust. The dust storms still strike, but the family has stopped feeling angry and helpless. Instead, they work with the land. Daddy starts using farming practices that help restore and protect the soil. "Daddy said he'd try some sorghum, / maybe some cotton, / admitting as how there might be something / to this notion of diversification folks were / talking about. . . ." Daddy has also started using a pair of mules instead of a tractor. Billie Jo thinks this is a good thing. She explains, "Maybe the tractor lifted him above the land, / maybe the fields didn't know him anymore, / didn't remember the touch of his feet, / or the stroke

of his hand, /or the bones of his knees, /and why should wheat grow for a stranger?"

Together, the Kelbys begin to look to the land with hope and not distrust.

## **Healing**

In *Out of the Dust*, Billie Jo and Daddy are both hurting—on the outside and the inside.

Billie Jo burns her hands in a horrible kitchen fire. After she is hurt, she explains that “there are only these /lumps of flesh / that once were hands long enough to span octaves, /swinging at my sides.” Daddy is not well, either. He has skin cancer, the kind that killed his own father. “My father has a raised spot /on the side of his nose / that never was there before /and won’t go away. /And there’s another on his cheek /and two more on his neck, /and I wonder /why the heck is he fooling around. /He knows what it is.”

The physical problems Billie Jo and Daddy show on the outside tell us how they are feeling on the inside. After the accident, nothing goes right for Billie Jo. She struggles with the never-ending dust storms, and she feels anger and guilt about Ma’s and Franklin’s deaths. She and Daddy don’t talk much anymore, so she finds no comfort at home. As the pain inside Billie Jo grows, her hands refuse to heal. She can’t even play her beloved piano. “I couldn’t play. /It had been too long. /My hands wouldn’t

work. /I just sat on the piano bench, /staring down at the keys.”  
Billie Jo wants her hands to get better but she has lost hope.

Daddy has lost hope, too. His wheat farm is doing badly. His wife and son are gone, and Billie Jo’s scarred hands remind him of the accident every day. When Daddy discovers spots on his skin, he knows they are cancer, but he won’t see Doc Rice. Billie Jo believes she knows why: “I think /he didn’t care much, /if he had some cancer /and took and died. /Figured he’d see Ma then, /he’d see my brother. /It’d be out of his hands. /He’d be out of the dust.”

When Billie Jo returns home after running away, things begin to change for the Kelby family. Billie Jo and Daddy are finally able to share their feelings with each other. The pain and sadness they’ve felt starts to get better.

As they heal on the inside, Billie Jo and Daddy are ready to heal on the outside, too. Billie Jo pleads with Daddy. She wants them both to see Doc Rice. “And I tell him how scared I am /about these spots on /his skin /and I see he’s scared too.” Daddy agrees to go, and Doc Rice removes the cancerous spots on his skin. “Now he’s going to wear bandages /where Doc cut the cancer out /the best he could.” Doc also tells Billie Jo her hands will get better. “They’ll heal up fine if you just use them.” Billie Jo listens to his advice. “And I’ve /been playing /a half hour /every day, /making the skin stretch, /making the scars stretch.” As *Out of the Dust* ends, both Daddy and Billie Jo have begun to heal in every way.

## Community

Everyone in Billie Jo's community is poor. Times have been tough since the dust storms began. "We haven't had a good crop in three years, / not since the bounty of '31, / and we're all whittled down to the bone these days. . . ." Even though the characters in *Out of the Dust* are facing hard times, they are willing to help others in their community.

Throughout the novel, we see neighbors reaching out to one another. Billie Jo's family is always willing to give to those who are less fortunate. Ma gladly donates food and a baby nightie to people in the community who need them even though her own family has little to eat and she is expecting a baby. And when a teenage boy comes by the house, he is given food, a bath, a haircut, and clean clothes. Billie Jo shares what she has, too. When she meets a man on a boxcar heading west, she gives him two biscuits. "I'll be hungry tonight, / what with giving my day's biscuits away. / But I can see the gaunt of hunger in his cheeks."

Billie Jo also learns about giving to others at school. Her teacher, Miss Freeland, is very kind to her students. She takes Billie Jo to the Christmas dinner since Billie Jo doesn't have Ma to take her anymore. The school also opens its doors to a migrant family. Students share their food and bring in clothes and toys for the family's children.

Everyone in the community looks out for one another. People come out in support of President Roosevelt's fund-raising balls, and "the whole of Joyce City came forward with gifts" when the

reverend took in an abandoned baby. When a terrible dust storm struck during a funeral, Billie Jo and Daddy are welcomed by a kind neighbor. “A woman opened her home to us, /all of us, /not just me and my father, /but the entire funeral procession.”

Even those people who receive help want to give back to the community. Buddy Williams, the father of the migrant family staying at the school, helps with repairs and cleans up the schoolyard. The teenage boy who Billie Jo’s family helps asks to work for his meal.

A helpful community helps the characters in *Out of the Dust* make it through the difficult years of the Dust Bowl.

**Thinking about the themes**

- Which of the three themes do you think is the most important? Why?
- Have you ever had to forgive someone? Did forgiving that person make you feel better?
- In what ways do people in your community help one another?

**A closer look:** Sometimes an author uses repeated images in a novel. These are things that show up again and again as the story unfolds. These images can help an author connect ideas, draw the reader’s attention, and add another layer of meaning to the story. Some of the repeated images in *Out of the Dust* are pianos, fire, apples, and babies. Can you find examples of these images? How do you think repeating them adds to the story?

## Free Verse: Why Is *Out of the Dust* Written Like That?



"I never attempted to write this book any other way than in free verse."

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

**W**hen you opened *Out of the Dust* for the first time, you probably noticed something unusual. The novel is not written paragraph by paragraph. Instead, it is a series of poems.

The style of poetry used in *Out of the Dust* is called free verse. Free-verse poems don't rhyme. They don't follow a particular rhythm, either. Each line of free verse can be as long or as short as the author wants it to be.

Karen Hesse has explained her decision to use free verse: "I realized [Billie Jo] lived a very spare life. Everything she did was carefully considered, because it took so much to survive, to get through one day living with parents who were struggling. It seemed as if the only way to get at that sparseness was to tell it through poetry."

Many book reviewers have praised Karen Hesse for writing *Out of the Dust* in free verse. Because every poem is written from

Billie Jo's point of view, we get to know what it feels like to experience a dust storm or live through a terrible accident. The poetic language used adds to our understanding as well.

### **Where do I begin?: Tips for reading free verse**

Each poem in *Out of the Dust* is written as if it were an entry in Billie Jo's diary. As you read each one, look for the following elements.

#### **Title**

Each poem has a title. Sometimes the title summarizes what is being described in the entry. For example, the January 1934 entry called "Permission to Play" is about Billie Jo getting Ma's permission to play piano at the Palace. However, the title may also give you information that isn't found anywhere else. The August 1934 entry titled "Birthday" describes how Billie Jo walks to town and stands outside Arley Wanderdale's house to listen to him play piano. There is no mention of her birthday in the poem. The title is the only way we know that this is how Billie Jo spent her birthday.

Before you begin each entry, read the title. What do you think the entry will be about? After you have finished the entry, read the title again. Did you guess correctly? What does the title tell you?

#### **Word placement**

In free verse, words can be placed anywhere on a page. There can be one word per line or dozens of words. Some lines are indented, and others are not. The structure of each line is so meaningful



Right hand  
playing notes sharp as  
tongues,  
telling stories while the  
smooth  
buttery rhythms back me up  
on the left.

You can almost feel the movement of Billie Jo's hands across the piano as you look at the way the lines are indented.

### **Repetition**

Sometimes words are repeated within a poem. Repetition may highlight an exciting and dramatic moment. The description of a dust storm that happened in March 1934 uses repetition: "The wind snatched that snow right off the fields, / leaving behind a sea of dust, / waves and / waves and / waves of / dust, / rippling across our yard." The repetition of the word *waves* helps us to see and feel the power of the dust storm.

In other cases, words are repeated to help us better understand Billie Jo. When Buddy Williams and his family move into the school in February 1935, Billie Jo describes them as "A man and his wife, pretty far along with a baby / coming, / a baby / coming. . . ." When the phrase "a baby coming" is repeated, it is a clue to us that Billie Jo is thinking about more than just the Williams family. She is probably remembering when her own ma had "a baby coming."

When you read each poem, look for repeated words. Why do you think the author chose to write the poem that way?

### **Similes and metaphors**

The poems in *Out of the Dust* use comparisons called similes and metaphors. Similes are comparisons that use the words *like* or *as*. One example of a simile in *Out of the Dust* is “On Sunday, / winds came, / bringing a red dust, / like prairie fire.” The dust is compared to a hot prairie fire, using the word *like*.

Metaphors are similar to similes but do not use *like* or *as*. For example, when Billie Jo describes her ma, she says, “She’s an old mule on the subject of my schooling.” Billie Jo doesn’t mean that Ma is actually a mule. She is just comparing her to one to explain that Ma is stubborn.

Similes and metaphors are tools that writers use to make their writing more colorful. Karen Hesse could have written “the dust was hot.” Or “Ma was stubborn.” Instead, she chose to use similes and metaphors. This poetic language makes Billie Jo’s experiences more interesting and more vivid.

### **Thinking about free verse**

- Do you agree with Karen Hesse’s decision to write *Out of the Dust* using free verse? Why or why not?
- Which entry in *Out of the Dust* is your favorite? Why?
- Look for similes and metaphors in the entries in *Out of the Dust*. What do they add to the story?

## Characters: Who Are These People, Anyway?



"the fact is  
what I am,  
I am because of the dust."

—Billie Jo, *Out of the Dust*

**A**s you read *Out of the Dust*, you will meet many different characters who are part of Billie Jo's family and community. Here is a list of those people. It is followed by brief descriptions of the most important characters.

### **The Kelby family**

Billie Jo Kelby	a thirteen-year-old girl, the book's main character and narrator
Ma ("Pol" Kelby)	Billie Jo's mother
Daddy (Bayard Kelby)	Billie Jo's father
Franklin Kelby	Billie Jo's baby brother
Aunt Ellis	Billie Jo's aunt

### **People in the community**

Coach Albright	the basketball coach at Billie Jo's school
Reverend Bingham	a minister

Mad Dog Craddock	a boy from Billie Jo's school who plays piano and sings
Joe De La Flor	a rancher
Miss Freeland	Billie Jo's teacher
County Agent Dewey	a government worker
Mr. Hardly	a storekeeper
Livie Killian	Billie Jo's friend who moves to California
Louise	Daddy's friend
Mrs. Love	the lady from FERA
Grandma Lucas	an elderly woman who has recently passed away
Doc Rice	a doctor
Miller Rice	a musician
Arley Wanderdale	a music teacher and local musician
Vera Wanderdale	Arley Wanderdale's wife and the person in charge of the dance revue at the Palace Theatre
Buddy Williams	a migrant worker who lives at Billie Jo's school with his family

**Billie Jo Kelby:** Billie Jo is the main character of the book. She is a thirteen-year-old girl who loves eating apples and playing piano. Tall and thin, Billie Jo has red hair and freckles on her face. She says, "I hollered myself red the day I was born. / Red's the color I've stayed ever since."

Life is hard on Billie Joe and her Oklahoma farming family. Their wheat crop keeps failing and little money is coming in. Even though things have been rough, Billie Jo manages to find

happiness as the novel begins. She does well at school and helps Daddy work their farm. She is also looking forward to the arrival of the family's new baby.

Billie Jo is a talented piano player. When Arley Wanderdale offers her the chance to perform at the Palace Theatre, Billie Jo is excited. "How supremely / heaven / playing piano / can be," she says. Shortly before her fourteenth birthday, Billie Jo burns her hands in the accident that kills Ma. Still, she tries to find joy in her music. Arley Wanderdale encourages her to play in the dance revue. She practices every day and wins third prize.

With Ma gone, Billie Jo tries to create a normal life at home for herself and her father. She cooks the meals and tries to clean up the dust the way her mother did. But nothing is normal for Billie Jo. Her life gets harder every day. Dust storms and fire damage her community, and her father is showing signs of skin cancer. To make things worse, she doesn't have anyone to talk to. She feels out of place with her old friends like Mad Dog Craddock, and her hands begin hurting her so badly that she can't even practice the piano anymore. Billie Jo is most upset that her father doesn't talk to her or try to comfort her. Soon she can no longer face her father, her anger, or the dust. So she runs away.

While she's traveling west, Billie Jo shares her life story with a man she meets in a boxcar. She discovers what she has to do to make things right. She must return to her father and tell him how she feels. When she does, she is able to find some happiness once again. She begins to practice piano and declares that she is thankful for "the certainty of home, the one I live in, / and the one / that lives in me."

**“Pol” Kelby/Ma:** Ma is Billie Jo’s strict but caring mother and another main character in the book. Ma is a proud woman. She makes Billie Jo return four cents to Mr. Hardly when he gives her too much change. She also insists on keeping a neat home for her family. She has “rules for dining” that keep the dust out of the food, and she is good at cleaning up after a dust storm. “She never could stand a mess.”

Ma is very generous to those in need, but she is more sensible when it comes to her own family. She encourages Daddy to dig a pond, try different crops, and prepare for the fact that it may not rain. She is also saving money to send Billie Jo to college to study music.

Ma appears to have come from a different background than the farming life she married into. Billie Jo says, “I don’t think she was ever / really meant for farm life, / I think she once had bigger dreams, / but she made herself over / to fit my father.”

Billie Jo says Ma “isn’t much to look at.” She is tall, thin, and has long, dark hair and bad teeth. Yet Ma tries to surround herself with beautiful things. She has a book of poetry, and she spends lots of time tending to her apple trees until they burst with blossoms. She longs for rain so badly that when a drizzle comes, she stands naked in the rain to enjoy it fully. Ma also plays piano in the family’s parlor. Billie Jo explains: “In the kitchen she is my ma, / in the barn and the fields she is my daddy’s wife, / but in the parlor Ma is something different.” Her piano playing is so dazzling that even a tired Daddy “gets soft eyes” when she plays.

In August 1934, Ma dies from the burns she received in a tragic kitchen fire.

**Bayard Kelby/Daddy:** Billie Jo's father is another important character in the book. He is a wheat farmer who fought in France during World War I. He is a handsome man "with his strong back, /and his blondy-red hair /and his high cheekbones rugged with wind." He is also a man of few words.

Daddy believes in his land and his crops. His wheat crops have failed three years in a row, but he keeps working the land. He is even willing to take a loan from the government so that he can plant more wheat. He explains, "I can turn the fields over, /start again. /It's sure to rain soon. /Wheat's sure to grow." Even after another dust storm destroys his latest crop, Daddy stubbornly refuses to think about trying to use his land for anything else. "It has to be wheat. /I've grown it before. /I'll grow it again."

After his wife dies in the accident and his wheat is destroyed by grasshoppers, Daddy's hope turns to doubt. He starts digging a hole that is six feet deep. Billie Jo thinks he is building the pond Ma wanted.

By autumn 1934, Daddy is trying to move on with his life. He takes a job as a hired hand at Wireless Power, signs up for night school, and gets another loan to grow wheat. But Daddy is not the same as he was before the accident. He has stopped caring about himself. He has skin cancer, but he won't go see Doc Rice. Daddy is not the same with Billie Jo, either. He hardly talks to

his daughter and won't reach out to her even though she is suffering.

After Billie Jo returns from running away and tells her father she is afraid of losing him, Daddy finally agrees to see Doc Rice.

Things start getting better for Daddy. He reaches out to Billie Jo and is happy about his engagement to Louise. He has also learned that he can't be so stubborn about the farm. He decides to plant different kinds of crops.

**Louise:** Louise is another main character. She is Daddy's teacher at night school. When Billie Jo leaves home, Louise stays with Daddy. By the time Billie Jo returns, Louise has become an important part of Daddy's life. She often comes to the Kelbys' home for dinner.

Soon Louise proves to be a source of hope and comfort for both Billie Jo and Daddy. She's a good listener, and she's able to help Daddy and Billie Jo get along better as a family. But, most of all, Louise "knows how to come into a home /and not step on the toes of a ghost." Louise doesn't try to replace Ma. Instead, she helps the family create new traditions.

It seems that Louise needs the Kelbys, too. She has never been married before "and didn't notice how lonely she was /until she met Daddy and fell into the /big hurt of his eyes."

By the end of the novel, Daddy and Louise are engaged to be married. Although it is December, Louise stops by the Kelby

home with a flowered hat “and when she smiles, / her face is / full enough of springtime, it makes / her hat seem just right.” Like springtime, Louise provides the Kelby home with a fresh, hopeful new beginning.

**Mad Dog Craddock:** Mad Dog Craddock is an important character because of his close friendship with Billie Jo. He is blue-eyed, handsome, and popular. He is also a talented singer and piano player. Mad Dog is such a good piano player that Billie Jo is jealous of him. Yet, in spite of her jealousy, it is clear that he is a good friend to Billie Jo. Billie Jo is thankful that he treats her like a regular person after the accident. “He looks at me like I am / someone he knows, / someone named Billie Jo Kelby.”

Mad Dog is the opposite of the people who are leaving to escape the dust. He has the talent to leave Oklahoma. He’s been performing at a radio station in Amarillo, Texas. Yet he keeps coming back to Oklahoma and the dust. Before he leaves for Amarillo for the first time, he explains, “I love this land, / no matter what.” Whenever Mad Dog comes home, he always stops by to see Billie Jo.

### **Thinking about the characters**

- Other than Billie Jo, who do you think is the most memorable character? Explain your answer.
- How has Billie Jo changed by the end of the novel?
- How does Daddy affect how Billie Jo thinks and feels? Do other characters influence one another in similar ways?