Literature Circle Guide: Out of the Dust

by Tara McCarthy
Contents

To the Teacher ................................................................. 4
Using the Literature Circle Guides in Your Classroom ............... 5
Setting Up Literature Response Journals .................................. 7
The Good Discussion .......................................................... 8
About Out of the Dust ......................................................... 9
About the Author: Karen Hesse ............................................ 9
Enrichment Readings: The Great Depression, The Dust Bowl, Pianos ............ 10
Literature Response Journal Reproducible: Before Reading the Book ....... 13
Group Discussion Reproducible: Before Reading the Book ............. 14
Literature Response Journal Reproducible: Winter 1934 .................. 15
Group Discussion Reproducible: Winter 1934 ............................. 16
Literature Response Journal Reproducible: Spring 1934 .................. 17
Group Discussion Reproducible: Spring 1934 .............................. 18
Literature Response Journal Reproducible: Summer 1934 ................ 19
Group Discussion Reproducible: Summer 1934 ........................... 20
Literature Response Journal Reproducible: Autumn 1934 ............... 21
Group Discussion Reproducible: Autumn 1934 ............................ 22
Literature Response Journal Reproducible: Winter 1935 ................. 23
Group Discussion Reproducible: Winter 1935 ............................. 24
Literature Response Journal Reproducible: Spring 1935 .................. 25
Group Discussion Reproducible: Spring 1935 .............................. 26
Literature Response Journal Reproducible: Summer 1935 ............... 27
Group Discussion Reproducible: Summer 1935 ........................... 28
Literature Response Journal Reproducible: Autumn 1935 ............... 29
Group Discussion Reproducible: Autumn 1935 ............................ 30
Reproducible: After Reading .................................................. 31
Reproducible: Individual Projects ............................................. 32
Reproducible: Group Projects ............................................... 32
Literature Discussion Evaluation Sheet ...................................... 33
To the Teacher

As a teacher, you naturally want to instill in your students the habits of confident, critical, independent, and lifelong readers. You hope that even when students are not in school they will seek out books on their own, think about and question what they are reading, and share those ideas with friends. An excellent way to further this goal is by using literature circles in your classroom.

In a literature circle, students select a book to read as a group. They think and write about it on their own in a literature response journal and then discuss it together. Both journals and discussions enable students to respond to a book and develop their insights into it. They also learn to identify themes and issues, analyze vocabulary, recognize writing techniques, and share ideas with each other—all of which are necessary to meet state and national standards.

This guide provides the support materials for using literature circles with Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse. The reading strategies, discussion questions, projects, and enrichment readings will also support a whole class reading of this text or can be given to enhance the experience of an individual student reading the book as part of a reading workshop.

Literature Circles

A literature circle consists of several students (usually three to five) who agree to read a book together and share their observations, questions, and interpretations. Groups may be organized by reading level or choice of book. Often these groups read more than one book together because, as students become more comfortable talking with one another, their observations and insights deepen.

When planning to use literature circles in your classroom, it can be helpful to do the following:

* Recommend four or five books from which students can choose. These books might be grouped by theme, genre, or author.

* Allow three or four weeks for students to read each book. Each of Scholastic’s Literature Circle Guides has the same number of sections as well as enrichment activities and projects. Even if students are reading different books in the Literature Circle Guide series, they can be scheduled to finish at the same time.

* Create a daily routine so students can focus on journal writing and discussions.

* Decide whether students will be reading books in class or for homework. If students do all their reading for homework, then allot class time for sharing journals and discussions. You can also alternate silent reading and writing days in the classroom with discussion groups.

Read More About Literature Circles

Getting the Most from Literature Groups by Penny Strube (Scholastic Professional Books, 1996)

Literature Circles by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse Publishers, 1994)
Using the *Literature Circle Guides* in Your Classroom

Each guide contains the following sections:
- background information about the author and book
- enrichment readings relevant to the book
- Literature Response Journal reproducibles
- Group Discussion reproducibles
- Individual and group projects
- Literature Discussion Evaluation Sheet

**Background Information and Enrichment Readings**

The background information about the author and the book and the enrichment readings are designed to offer information that will enhance students’ understanding of the book. You may choose to assign and discuss these sections before, during, or after the reading of the book. Because each enrichment concludes with questions that invite students to connect it to the book, you can use this section to inspire them to think and record their thoughts in the literature response journal.

**Literature Response Journal Reproducibles**

Although these reproducibles are designed for individual students, they should also be used to stimulate and support discussions in literature circles. Each page begins with a reading strategy and follows with several journal topics. At the bottom of the page, students select a type of response (prediction, question, observation, or connection) for free-choice writing in their response journals.

**Reading Strategies**

Since the goal of the literature circle is to empower lifelong readers, a different reading strategy is introduced in each section. Not only does the reading strategy allow students to understand this particular book better, it also instills a habit of mind that will continue to be useful when they read other books. A question from the Literature Response Journal or the Group Discussion page is always tied to the reading strategy.

If everyone in class is reading the same book, you may present the reading strategy as a mini-lesson to the entire class. For literature circles, however, the group of students can read over and discuss the strategy together at the start of class and then experiment with the strategy as they read silently for the rest of the period. You may want to allow time at the end of class so the group can talk about what they noticed as they read. As an alternative, the literature circle can review the reading strategy for the next section after they have completed their discussion. That night, students can try out the reading strategy as they read on their own so they will be ready for the next day’s literature circle discussion.

**Literature Response Journal Topics**

A literature response journal allows a reader to “converse” with a book. Students write questions, point out things they notice about the story, recall personal experiences, and make connections to other texts in their journals. In other words, they are using writing to explore what they think about the book. See page 7 for tips on how to help students set up their literature response journals.

1. The questions for the literature response journals have no right or wrong answers but are designed to help students look beneath the surface of the plot and develop a richer connection to the story and its characters.
2. Students can write in their literature response journals as soon as they have finished a reading assignment. Again, you may choose to have students do this for homework or make time during class.
3. The literature response journals are an excellent tool for students to use in their literature circles. They can highlight ideas and thoughts in their journals that they want to share with the group.
4. When you evaluate students’ journals, consider whether they have completed all the assignments and have responded in depth and thoughtfully. You may want to check each day to make sure students are keeping up with the assignments. You can read and respond to the journals at a halfway point (after five entries) and again at the end. Some teachers suggest that students pick out their five best entries for a grade.
Group Discussion Reproducibles

These reproducibles are designed for use in literature circles. Each page begins with a series of discussion questions for the group to consider. A mini-lesson on an aspect of the writer's craft follows the discussion questions. See page 8 for tips on how to model good discussions for students.

Literature Discussion Questions: In a literature discussion, students experience a book from different points of view. Each reader brings her or his own unique observations, questions, and associations to the text. When students share their different reading experiences, they often come to a wider and deeper understanding than they would have reached on their own.

The discussion is not an exercise in finding the right answers nor is it a debate. Its goal is to explore the many possible meanings of a book. Be sure to allow enough time for these conversations to move beyond easy answers—try to schedule 25–35 minutes for each one. In addition, there are important guidelines to ensure that everyone's voice is heard.

1. Let students know that participation in the literature discussion is an important part of their grade. You may choose to watch one discussion and grade it. (You can use the Literature Discussion Evaluation Sheet on page 33.)

2. Encourage students to evaluate their own performance in discussions using the Literature Discussion Evaluation Sheet. They can assess not only their own level of involvement but also how the group itself has functioned.

3. Help students learn how to talk to one another effectively. After a discussion, help them process what worked and what didn't. Videotape discussions if possible, and then evaluate them together. Let one literature circle watch another and provide feedback to it.

4. It can be helpful to have a facilitator for each discussion. The facilitator can keep students from interrupting each other, help the conversation get back on track when it digresses, and encourage shyer members to contribute. At the end of each discussion, the facilitator can summarize everyone's contributions and suggest areas for improvement.

5. Designate other roles for group members. For instance, a recorder can take notes and/or list questions for further discussion. A summarizer can open each literature circle meeting by summarizing the chapter(s) the group has just read. Encourage students to rotate these roles, as well as that of the facilitator.

Writer's Craft: This section encourages students to look at the writer's most important tool—words. It points out new vocabulary, writing techniques, and uses of language. One or two questions invite students to think more deeply about the book and writing in general. These questions can either become part of the literature circle discussion or be written about in students' journals.

Literature Discussion Evaluation Sheet

Both you and your students will benefit from completing these evaluation sheets. You can use them to assess student performance, and as mentioned earlier, students can evaluate their own individual performances, as well as their group's performance. The Literature Discussion Evaluation Sheet appears on page 33.
Setting Up Literature Response Journals

Although some students may already keep literature response journals, others may not know how to begin. To discourage students from merely writing elaborate plot summaries and to encourage them to use their journals in a meaningful way, help them focus their responses around the following elements: predictions, observations, questions, and connections. Have students take time after each assigned section to think about and record their responses in their journals. Sample responses appear below.

◆ Predictions: Before students read the book, have them study the cover and the jacket copy. Ask if anyone has read any other books by Karen Hesse. To begin their literature response journals, tell students to jot down their impressions about the book. As they read, students will continue to make predictions about what a character might do or how the plot might turn. After finishing the book, they can reassess their initial predictions. Good readers understand that they must constantly activate prior knowledge before, during, and after they read. They adjust their expectations and predictions; a book that is completely predictable is not likely to capture anyone’s interest. A student about to read *Out of the Dust* might write the following:

*I can tell by the summary on the back of the book that this is going to be a very realistic story. The main character is a girl named Billie Jo, and she faces a lot of problems. Her mother is gone, she can’t play the piano anymore, and the whole world around her is changing—for the worse.*

◆ Observations: This activity takes place immediately after reading begins. In a literature response journal, the reader recalls fresh impressions about the characters, setting, and events. Most readers mention details that stand out for them even if they are not sure what their importance is. For example, a reader might list phrases that describe how a character looks or the feeling a setting evokes. Many readers note certain words, phrases, or passages in a book. Others note the style of an author's writing or the voice in which the story is told. A student just starting to read *Out of the Dust* might write the following:

*I’m trying to get used to Billie Jo’s style of talking about things. My teacher says that Billie Jo’s words are written in free verse. That’s new to me! I’ll just have to learn how this form of writing works.*

◆ Questions: Point out that good readers don’t necessarily understand everything they read. To clarify their uncertainty, they ask questions. Encourage students to identify passages that confuse or trouble them and emphasize that they shouldn’t take anything for granted. Share the following student example:

*Why does Billie Jo’s mother get so irritated when Billie Jo plays the piano? I can see that there’s a conflict between Billie Jo and her mom about this, but I don’t understand why. They both love the piano. Shouldn’t that be something that connects them?*

◆ Connections: Remind students that one story often leads to another. When one friend tells a story, the other friend is often inspired to tell one, too. The same thing happens when someone reads a book. A character reminds the reader of a relative, or a situation is similar to something that happened to him or her. Sometimes a book makes a reader recall other books or movies. These connections can be helpful in revealing some of the deeper meanings or patterns of a book. The following is an example of a student connection:

*Billie Jo’s goal to play the piano and tour with a band are interrupted by family problems. Something like that happened to my sister’s friend. She was accepted by the college she wanted to go to, but then her mother lost her job so my sister’s friend had to give up college to help support her family.*
The Good Discussion

In a good literature discussion, students are always learning from one another. They listen to one another and respond to what their peers have to say. They share their ideas, questions, and observations. Everyone feels comfortable about talking, and no one interrupts or puts down what anyone else says. Students leave a good literature discussion with a new understanding of the book—and sometimes with new questions about it. They almost always feel more engaged by what they have read.

◆ Modeling a Good Discussion: In this era of combative and confessional TV talk shows, students often don't have any idea of what it means to talk productively and creatively together. You can help them have a better idea of what a good literature discussion is if you let them experience one. Select a thought-provoking short story or poem for students to read, and then choose a small group to model a discussion of the work for the class.

Explain to participating students that the objective of the discussion is to explore the text thoroughly and learn from each other. Explain to the whole class that it takes time to learn how to have a good discussion, and that the first discussion may not achieve everything they hope it will. Duplicate a copy of the Literature Discussion Evaluation Sheet for each student. Go over the helpful and unhelpful contributions shown on the sheet. Tell them to fill out the sheets as they watch the model discussion. Then have the group of students hold its discussion while the rest of the class observes. Try not to interrupt or control the discussion, and remind the student audience not to participate. It’s okay if the discussion falters, as this is a learning experience.

Allow 15-20 minutes for the discussion. When it is finished, ask each student in the group to reflect out loud about what worked and what didn’t. Then have the students who observed share their impressions. What kinds of comments were helpful? How could the group have talked to each other more productively?

You may want to let another group experiment with a discussion so students can try out what they learned from the first one.

◆ Assessing Discussions: The following tips will help students monitor how well their group is functioning:

1. One person should keep track of all behaviors by each group member, both helpful and unhelpful, during the discussion.
2. At the end of the discussion, each individual should think about how he or she did. How many helpful and unhelpful checks did he or she receive?
3. The group should look at the Literature Discussion Evaluation Sheet and assess its performance as a whole. Were most of the behaviors helpful? Were any behaviors unhelpful? How could the group improve?

In good discussions, you will often hear students say the following:

“I was wondering if anyone knew . . .”
“I see what you are saying. That reminds me of something that happened earlier in the book.”
“What do you think?”
“Did anyone notice on page 57 that . . .”
“I disagree with you because . . .”
“I agree with you because . . .”
“This reminds me so much of when . . .”
“Do you think this could mean . . .”
“I’m not sure I understand what you’re saying. Could you explain it a little more to me?”
“That reminds me of what you were saying yesterday about . . .”
“I just don’t understand this.”
“I love the part that says . . .”
“Here, let me read this paragraph. It’s an example of what I’m talking about.”
About Out of the Dust

Out of the Dust is a powerful book for at least three reasons: 1) It provides a carefully researched, in-depth account of the Dust Bowl years of the early 1930s when Great Plains farmlands were devastated and thousands of farm families were thrown into poverty; 2) it presents readers with a memorable main character, Billie Jo, who—even as she suffers through these years and the resultant personal tragedies—manages not only to record the hardships in her journal but also to survive them and become stronger; and 3) the author, Karen Hesse—never one to talk down to young readers—has Billie Jo tell the story in the form of free verse, a strategy which allows readers to “hear” the speaker almost as if she were speaking aloud to them.

Since its publication in 1998, Hesse has won many awards for Out of the Dust including the Newbery Medal; citations by the School Library Journal, the ALA, and Publisher’s Weekly as a best book of the year; and a listing by the New York Public Library as one of 100 Titles for Reading and Sharing.

About the Author: Karen Hesse

Good writers search for the best way to tell their stories. For Karen Hesse, this search has led her to use different narrative forms. In A Light in the Storm, which is part of the Dear America series, the heroine is a lighthouse keeper who tells her story in the form of a diary. In Letters from Rifka, the narrative form is just what the title suggests, a story made up of letters. In Out of the Dust, Hesse combines the journal form with free verse.

Hesse has said that it takes her a long time to decide how to tell a story. Before she even begins to write, she does extensive research into the time period in which her main character lived. As Hesse studies the archives or interviews people, she gradually reaches insights about whom—either a real or a fictional person—can best recount the events of the story and in what form that character will speak.

Hesse’s books reflect not only her devotion to finding the facts, but also the extensive range of her interests. At Towson State College in Maryland, her majors were theater, anthropology, psychology, and English. Hesse now lives in Brattleboro, Vermont, with her husband and two daughters.

When asked about what she’s working on, Hess often responds with the observation with which many writers would agree: if you tell too much about a story before you’ve finished it, the story may not turn out as well as you expected it to.

Other Books by Karen Hesse

Just Juice
Letters from Rifka
A Light in the Storm
The Music of Dolphins
Phoenix Rising
Sable
Stowaway
A Time of Angels
Witness
Enrichment:
The Great Depression

In Out of the Dust, Billie Jo refers to the Depression that hit the United States in the 1930s. The Depression affected not only low-income and middle-income families like Billie Jo’s, but also very wealthy families in all parts of the country. During the Depression, many rich people became poor, and many people who had been struggling on the edge of poverty lost everything.

To understand the Depression, you have to first look back at the 1920s. What rich years they seemed to be! The U.S. economy was booming because of the development of new technologies and new industries. Americans began investing in these fields through the stock market—a place where investments are bought and sold. And if people didn’t have the money on hand to invest, banks would lend them some. Most investors were convinced they’d make so much money that it would be easy to pay back the money they’d borrowed. Up and up went the value of new businesses! Up and up went the debts of the people who’d borrowed money to invest in the businesses! A few observers said the boom couldn’t last forever, but their warnings were ignored.

Then, on Thursday, October 24, 1929—Black Thursday—the stock market crashed. Investors panicked and became convinced that their investments were losing money. They began to sell off their investments for much less than what they’d paid for them. In the crash, great fortunes were lost. With no money to spend, and with huge debts to pay, these formerly high-powered investors could no longer hire people to work for them. Workers were laid off. People who lost their jobs often had to beg on the streets for money to feed their families.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt managed to help some poor families through organizations like the Works Project Administration, which paid people to build highways, and through a fund that paid out-of-work artists to make murals for post offices and other public buildings.

The end of the Great Depression didn’t come until the United States entered World War II. At that point, almost every qualified citizen, male or female, could find a good-paying job that also contributed to the war effort.

As you read Out of the Dust, what other indications can you find that show how the Roosevelt administration attempted to raise people’s spirits and economic situations?
Enrichment:
The Dust Bowl

The Oklahoma family you’re going to read about lived during a hard time in American history. Not only were they struggling through the Great Depression, but they were also seeing the destruction of their farmland. Billie Jo and her family lived in the Dust Bowl—an area of more than 100 million acres that included Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas, and Oklahoma, and parts of Wyoming, Montana, and South and North Dakota.

The Great Plains has always had weather that changes dramatically. Droughts, during which rain is scarce for months or even years, may be followed by downpours or by steady rain that causes flooding. The temperature in this region goes up and down rapidly, and heavy winds develop suddenly. For centuries, however, in spite of these varying conditions, the soil had been held in place by the natural vegetation that grew on the plains, such as buffalo grass and grama grass.

When settlers moved to the Great Plains after the Civil War, they began to clear the natural grasses in order to grow wheat. Since the demand for wheat grew as the years went by, especially during World War I, farmers continued to plant wheat. Unfortunately, wheat didn’t hold the soil in place like the natural vegetation had done. In periods of drought and high winds, the soil blew away.

By the time Billie Jo, the narrator of Out of the Dust, was writing her journal, there had been a drought for several years. In addition, the farmlands had been overplanted with wheat, and months of heavy winds had been rushing across the Great Plains. As a result, the wheat couldn’t be grown in the water-starved, wind-swept fields. Without the natural vegetation to hold it down, the soil turned into dust. And what dust it was! Carried by winds, the dust not only covered homes in the Great Plains, but also darkened the skies as far east as the Atlantic Coast and as far south as the Gulf of Mexico.

Hundreds of families abandoned their farms and traveled west in an attempt to find better lives. For those families who refused to move, help eventually came in 1935 from federal and state governments. Programs were put in place to teach farmers about soil conservation. Among them were 1) rotating crops to grow wheat one year, sorghum the next year, and nothing the next year to allow the soil to recover; 2) planting shelter belts of trees around a farm in order to break the force of winds; and 3) terracing farms into sections or strips so that different kinds of crops are grown in different areas.

How does Billie Jo’s father respond to the new government programs for farmers? Think about what kind of qualities a successful farmer must have. How does Billie Jo’s father measure up to your standards?
Enrichment: Pianos

As you read Out of the Dust, you’ll soon discover that one of Billie Jo’s greatest pleasures is playing the piano. It’s a skill she learned from her mother, who received an upright piano as a wedding gift.

The piano is a stringed instrument with a long history. The Old Testament says in Genesis 4:21 that Jubal played a stringed instrument, the harp. Many centuries later, along came the dulcimer—a flat box with strings across the top. It’s played by striking the strings with a mallet. During the Middle Ages came the clavichord and the harpsichord; these two were the first stringed instruments that had keyboards.

The problem with all these stringed instruments, however, was that they had the same tone: that is, it was almost impossible to play softer and louder on them. Then, in 1709, an Italian musical instrument builder, Bartolomeo Cristofori, invented the pianoforte. His invention, a keyboard instrument with strings that were struck by hammers to resonate softly or loudly—depending on how hard the pianist struck them—was the beginning of the modern-day piano.

Since the invention of the piano, almost all composers have written music for the instrument. The music extends from the works of Beethoven and Brahms—played in concert halls on grand pianos—to modern songs played on upright pianos in clubs and other small local places like the ones where Billie Jo performs.

Getting into the music, striking the keys softly or loudly, playing quickly or slowly, Billie Jo can interpret the music in a way that is unique to her. Why do you think music, and particularly playing the piano, is so important to Billie Jo? Compare her feelings about music to your own.
Before Reading the Book

Reading Strategy: Asking Questions

Take some time to read the summary of the story on the back cover or inside jacket of this book. Then briefly leaf through the pages. What questions come to your mind? For example, you may wonder what the title means, or why the sentences in the story are divided in an unusual way. Spend five minutes writing questions that you have about the book. Write as fast as you can. Don’t edit yourself along the way.

Writing in Your Literature Response Journal

A. Write about one of these topics in your journal. Circle the topic you chose.

1. What are some weather-related problems that farmers have to deal with? How does weather—good or bad—affect a farmer’s income?

2. What are some books you’ve read about families who have had to deal with hardships or meet unexpected challenges? Which one of these books seems most realistic to you? Tell why.

3. As you well know, many pre-teens and teenagers have conflicts with their parents, but they also cooperate with their parents to settle big problems and resolve major issues. In your journal, make two columns: Conflicts and Cooperation. In each column, list as many parent-teen examples as you can think of.

B. What were your predictions, questions, observations, and connections about the book? Write about one of them in your journal. Check the response you chose.

☐ Prediction       ☐ Question       ☐ Observation       ☐ Connection
Out of the Dust
Before Reading the Book

For Your Discussion Group

• Share some of the questions you jotted down in response to the Reading Strategy on page 13. Group members who can suggest answers to these questions can share those answers, too. Discuss what big questions remain to be answered by reading the book.

• The setting of Out of the Dust is a farm in Oklahoma almost 70 years ago. The main character is a girl, Billie Jo, who is about your age. Brainstorm what you might have in common with Billie Jo and how your day-to-day lives might be different from hers.

• As you’ll discover, Billie Jo is heroic in many ways. Talk about what it means to be heroic. What are the qualities of a hero?

TIP

When you are brainstorming, remember that the goal is to collect as many different ideas as possible without commenting on them. Everybody’s ideas should be included.
Out of the Dust
Winter 1934

Reading Strategy:
Noticing the Author’s Style

Karen Hesse, the author of *Out of the Dust*, has chosen to write the story in a poetic form called free verse. Free verse doesn’t have a regular beat like conventional poetry does and seldom rhymes. What makes free verse poetry at all? The answer in general is that free verse tries to capture the rhythm of human speech. Line breaks come at those points when the speaker in the story might pause just very slightly before saying the next words. Free verse is best appreciated when it's read aloud. Read sections of the story aloud to yourself. Try to capture the rhythm of someone who is speaking. Remember to pause when you reach punctuation such as periods and question marks.

Writing in Your Literature Response Journal

A. Write about one of these topics in your journal. Circle the topic you chose.

1. With a classmate, read the first three free-verse stanzas of *Out of the Dust* aloud. Pause slightly when you come to the end of a line. Practice until you can make Billie Jo’s words flow, hesitate, and continue just as she might say them. Write about your oral reading. What was difficult about it? What was rewarding?

2. A free-verse approach can enable a writer to set up lines to reflect a physical activity. Take a careful look at the section called *On Stage*. Summarize what Billie Jo is doing in this section. How do the free-verse lines—one to the left, one to the right—reflect the activity?

B. What were your predictions, questions, observations, and connections as you read? Write about one of them in your journal. Check the response you chose.

☐ Prediction  ☐ Question  ☐ Observation  ☐ Connection
**Out of the Dust**

**Winter 1934**

**For Your Discussion Group**

🌟 In this chapter, you learn a lot about the narrator and her family, friends, and neighbors. At the same time, you begin to get a picture of the setting, the particular time and place in which these people live. Focus on setting by discussing the following:

- What's happening in the winter of 1934 that alarms Billie Jo's family and neighbors?
- How are farmers coping with this problem?
- Why is Livie's family moving west to California?
- Why does Billie Jo’s dad insist on staying put? Would you go or stay?
- In the section called *Fields of Flashing Light*, the effect of dust storms is made vividly clear as a storm invades Billie Jo’s home. Read aloud some passages from this section that you think are particularly striking.

🌟 In spite of outside threats that may loom all around them, many people continue to pursue their personal goals. What are Billie Jo’s personal goals? How does she pursue them? Who helps her? Who or what stands in Billie Jo’s way?

**Writer’s Craft: The Narrator’s Voice**

The narrator is the person who is telling the story. Sometimes the narrator is an outside observer who tells what’s happening but who’s not actually involved in the events. That’s not the case in *Out of the Dust*! The narrator’s voice in this story is that of Billie Jo, whose life is deeply connected to everything that’s happening around her. The writer makes Billie Jo very real to us by relating events as Billie Jo experiences them and in her own way of speaking. For example, as she contrives to get her mother to let her play the piano, Billie Jo says:

> That’s a way I’ve found of gaining what I want,
by catching Ma off guard,
especially when I’m after permission to play piano.
Right out asking her is no good.

Find other passages in this chapter that help you get to know Billie Jo.
Out of the Dust
Spring 1934

Reading Strategy: Rereading

Like springtime itself, this chapter is short. Yet, there’s a lot of important information packed into it. As a good reader, you’ll benefit from rereading the chapter so you can think about what was happening in the spring of 1934. For example, Billie Jo writes about the following events:

• Dust invades the schoolhouse.
• Banks close.
• Her parents argue about how to use their land.

As you reread the chapter, note several other important things that happen. What facts became clearer to you on your second reading?

Writing in Your Literature Response Journal

A. Write about one of these topics in your journal. Circle the topic you chose.

1. Reread the sections called “Apple Blossoms” and “Apples.” Think about the feelings Billie Jo is expressing in these verses. Visualize what she is describing. Then draw a picture that incorporates your visual idea with Billie Jo’s words.

2. Write about a time when severe weather, such as a violent thunderstorm, caused serious problems in your community.

3. Imagine that you’re a farmer in the dusty spring of 1934. Write one or two paragraphs that express your feelings as you try to harvest your wheat.

B. What were your predictions, questions, observations, and connections as you read? Write about one of them in your journal. Check the response you chose.

☐ Prediction    ☐ Question    ☐ Observation    ☐ Connection
Out of the Dust
Spring 1934

For Your Discussion Group

Recall that Ma is the one who taught Billie Jo to play the piano. Discuss Ma’s present attitude toward Billie Jo’s love of the piano. Why does she behave this way? Suggest at least two possibilities.

Look back at the section “On the Road with Arley” and read aloud some lines that capture Billie Jo’s feelings about performing with a group. Besides music, what does the piano represent to Billie Jo? What does she think playing the piano might allow her to do eventually? Explain whether or not you think her goals are realistic.

Writer's Craft: Making References

In literature, a reference is a sentence or passage directing the reader’s attention to something that has happened previously. Usually the reference is to an event in the story itself. For example, when Ma says the following words, you know she’s referring to the hopelessness of trying to grow wheat anymore.

“Can’t you see
what's happening, Bayard?
The wheat’s not meant to be here.”

Sometimes, however, there are references to events that are not a direct part of the story. In “Banks,” Ma says that the banks closed because “they didn’t have enough money to go around.” and in “World War,” Billie Jo mentions that her father served and which made poppies so special to him.

While you don’t need to know exactly what Billie Jo is referring to in order to enjoy the story, it will add to your understanding of the plot and characters if you do. Take time to explore these references. Why did banks close in 1934? What was the “Great War” in which Billie Jo’s father served and which made poppies so special to him?
Out of the Dust
Summer 1934

Reading Strategy: Summarizing

When you summarize, you restate the main events in a story or in a section of a story. For example, a summary of Spring 1934 might look like this:

Billie Jo clings to her hope of going on the road as a piano player. But the dust storms and the needs of her family interfere with her goal.

By summarizing what you read, you can move with increased understanding into the chapters that lie ahead. Of course, summarizing is not always easy. Sometimes so much happens in a chapter that you have to consider which events are most important to the plot. You have to sift through the events and discard some of them. In reading Summer 1934, which incidents do you think are essential to the plot?

Writing in Your Literature Response Journal

A. Write about one of these topics in your journal. Circle the topic you chose.

1. Choose a section of this chapter that you find particularly important or moving, such as “Birthday” or “The Accident.” Summarize the events in that section. Why do they affect you so strongly?

2. Billie Jo feels that the neighborhood women blame her for her mother’s death. Do you think she’s responsible? Is anyone to blame, or was it an accident? After answering the questions, take a different position and consider the questions again.

3. Why do Billie Jo and her father become distant with one another? If you can, relate their separation to one that you or someone you know has experienced.

B. What were your predictions, questions, observations, and connections as you read? Write about one of them in your journal. Check the response you chose.

☐ Prediction  ☐ Question  ☐ Observation  ☐ Connection
Out of the Dust
Summer 1934

For Your Discussion Group

★ In this section, Billie Jo’s life changes dramatically in several ways. Discuss the challenges she faces. Which of her problems seems most overwhelming to you? Explain why.

★ As Billie Jo’s personal life changes for the worse, so does the land around her. Read aloud some verses from this chapter that you think describe Billie Jo’s surroundings in vivid ways.

★ In “The Path of Our Sorrow,” Miss Freeland explains the circumstances that led to the dust bowl. Summarize her explanation. Why do you think she tells this story to her pupils?

Writer’s Craft: Description

Using Billie Jo’s voice, Karen Hesse describes people, landscapes, and events with such clarity that readers can almost see them. One reason Hesse’s descriptions are so effective is her choice of specific words. Think about the language she uses in these lines from “Night Bloomer.”

I rubbed my gritty eyes with swollen hands.
My stomach grizzled as I
made my way through the dark. . . .

Another descriptive technique Hesse uses is simile. Similes use the words as or like to compare very different things. Do you see the simile in the lines below?

I saw the cloud descending.
It whirred like a thousand engines.

Locate other powerful descriptions in this book. Then try writing your own description of an event in this or an earlier chapter.
Out of the Dust
Autumn 1934

Reading Strategy:
Drawing Conclusions

The author Karen Hesse supplies just enough facts to allow her readers to draw their own conclusions about the characters and story. For example, you’ve probably drawn the conclusion that Billie Jo has a crush on Mad Dog. In this section, you find some facts that help you conclude that Mad Dog’s pretty fond of Billie Jo, too. By leaving space to allow their readers to draw conclusions, writers pull you into the story.

What other conclusions have you made about Billie Jo or one of the other characters? What evidence in the story did you base your conclusions on?

Writing in Your Literature Response Journal

A. Write about one of these topics in your journal. Circle the topic you chose.

1. Find and quote the lines in this section that help you conclude that Mad Dog likes Billie Jo for just who she is. What does this tell you about what kind of a person Mad Dog is?

2. What is Billie Jo’s general mood in this section? What signs do you see that she may be beginning to recover from the tragedy of her mother’s death?

B. What were your predictions, questions, observations, and connections as you read? Write about one of them in your journal. Check the response you chose.

☐ Prediction ☐ Question ☐ Observation ☐ Connection
Out of the Dust
Autumn 1934

For Your Discussion Group

In the last part of this section, Billie Jo says:

I feel such a hunger
   to see such things.
   And such an anger
   because I can’t.

Based on the lines above and on what you’ve read in previous sections, discuss some of the things Billie Jo wants to see and do. What holds her back? Why is she angry? What qualities does she have that might help her achieve her goals?

Discuss people you know or know about who have overcome tremendous odds to reach their goals. What characteristics do they seem to share?

Writer’s Craft: Structuring a Story

Keeping a journal of your own can be a challenging task. Even more challenging is structuring a story, like this one, so that the entire plot is told through the journal entries of the main character. In a way, the writer has to become an actor, taking the part of the character and trying to think and talk like that character.

Karen Hesse is especially good at this technique. She also used it in Stowaway, which she structured as the journal of an eleven-year-old boy who really sailed with Captain James Cook in 1768.

To explore the challenges and rewards of journal keeping, try the technique yourself. Make an entry at the end of every week about the most important things that happened during the week. Instead of recording bare facts, use description to make the events interesting. Also be sure to indicate why you feel these particular events were important.
Out of the Dust
Winter 1935

Reading Strategy:
Collecting Information

You may think that collecting information requires you to look up facts in an almanac or encyclopedia or on Web sites. While you’re reading Out of the Dust, however, you’re collecting information. You’re learning facts about the characters and the setting of the story. In the entry for September 1934, Billie Jo quotes her teacher’s explanation about how the Dust Bowl developed. How does this information add to your understanding of the poem in this section called “Haydon P. Nye”?

Writing in Your Literature Response Journal

A. Write about one of these topics in your journal. Circle the topic you chose.

1. In earlier sections, you probably collected information about Billie Jo’s relationship with her mother. How did Billie Jo feel when she showed her mother a great report card, and her mother simply said, “I knew you could”? In this section, why does Billie Jo wish she could hear those words from her mother now?

2. As sad as Billie Jo is, she seems to forget her sorrows and feel happy when she plays the piano in the contest. What accounts for her change of mood? Write about activities that help you forget your problems for a while.

3. On pages 119–124, you read about a migrant family desperately looking for a better place to live. What do you know about similar situations that exist in this country today?

B. What were your predictions, questions, observations, and connections as you read? Write about one of them in your journal. Check the response you chose.

☐ Prediction    ☐ Question    ☐ Observation    ☐ Connection
Out of the Dust
Winter 1935

For Your Discussion Group

!* Estranged* and *estrangement* are useful words to know as you discuss this chapter. These words mean being or feeling removed, hostile, or unsympathetic toward individuals to whom we used to feel close. Discuss why Billie Jo feels estranged from her father. What is he doing or not doing that makes her feel estranged from him? From whom or from what else does Billie Jo feel isolated? Why does she feel so alone?

!* In spite of Billie Jo’s general loneliness, she seems to briefly recover her old attachments in this section. Discuss some of these situations. For example, how do the “President’s Ball” and the episode in “Dust Storm” help her reconnect with her dad? What other situations in this section suggest that Billie Jo might eventually overcome her feelings of estrangement?

!* Discuss why Billie Jo may feel so reluctant to play her mother’s piano. Has it simply to do with her damaged hands, or is there a deeper reason?

Writer’s Craft: Atmosphere

*Atmosphere* is the general feeling or mood the writer creates through the skillful use of language. For example, in “Dust Storm,” Karen Hesse creates an atmosphere of dread.

*Brown earth rained down
from sky.
I could not catch my breath
the way the dust pressed on my chest
and wouldn’t stop.*

As a contrast, find a section in this chapter that creates an atmosphere of hope or joy. What words and phrases help to create this atmosphere? Record the passage in your journal, and then share it with your classmates.
Out of the Dust
Spring 1935

Reading Strategy: Visualizing
When you read a picture book as a little child, you relied on the pictures to show you what was happening in the story. Now that you’re older, you rely on the writer’s words to help you visualize, or see, the story as it unfolds. What scenes in this section bring the most vivid images to your mind? It might be the burning of the railroad station or the wonderful experience of a few days of steady rain or how people reacted as they listened to Mad Dog’s radio performance. Which parts of this section seem most vivid to you? What details do you see in your mind’s eye?

Writing in Your Literature Response Journal
A. Write about one of these topics in your journal. Circle the topic you chose.

1. Draw a picture of a scene you’ve visualized in this chapter. Write a caption that summarizes what’s going on in your picture.

2. In this section, Billie Jo refers to organizations called the FERA and the CCC. Do some research to find out what these acronyms, or initials, represent. Write about your findings in your journal and share them with your classmates.

3. Karen Hesse often leaves her readers on edge. She makes you feel hopeful and also nervous about how things might turn out. Tell what makes you nervous about Billie Jo’s feelings and actions in this section. What concerns do you have about her? What gives you hope about her future?

B. What were your predictions, questions, observations, and connections as you read? Write about one of them in your journal. Check the response you chose.

☐ Prediction ☐ Question ☐ Observation ☐ Connection
Out of the Dust
Spring 1935

For Your Discussion Group

★ Reread “Baby” in this section. What did some desperate parents do during the Dust Bowl years? Do you approve or disapprove of the decisions you’ve read about? What else might they have done to help their families?

★ Even though Billie Jo feels estranged from her father in many ways, she decides to stick with him for a while. Suggest different answers to the following questions: Does Billie Jo’s father feel as attached to Billie Jo as she does to him? What do you think her father leaves Aunt Ellis’s invitation displayed on the shelf? What is he trying to help Billie Jo understand? How might she feel like the baby left on the church steps?

Writer’s Craft: Imagery

If, in reading this book, you’ve been able to vividly see in your mind’s eye what’s going on, that’s because the story is full of imagery. Imagery is language that appeals to the senses. For example, the lines below appeal to the sense of sight:

Dust lay two feet deep in ripply waves across the parlor floor.

One kind of imagery is called personification. A writer uses personification to give human characteristics to non-human things. In the lines below, notice how Karen Hesse uses personification to describe the actions of the fire:

but the flames,
crazy in the wind,
licked away at the wooden frames of the three box cars.

Find other examples of imagery in the book. Read aloud the examples and explain why they impress you.
Out of the Dust
Summer 1935

Reading Strategy: Making Predictions

As you really get into a book and come to know the characters, you often try to predict what they’re going to do next and how they’re going to feel. Your predictions may turn out to be right on target, but sometimes you’ll find that you have to adjust them. Although a writer wants the characters to behave in realistic and believable ways, he or she also wants to keep readers intrigued. If you could predict everything that’s going to happen, you’d probably quickly lose interest in the story. You may have correctly predicted that Billie Jo would have conflicting feelings about her relationship with her mom after the accident. Which events and actions in this section have taken you by surprise? Did you predict that Billie Jo would run away from home?

Writing in Your Literature Response Journal

A. Write about one of these topics in your journal. Circle the topic you chose.

1. In the previous sections, what was your first prediction about why Billie Jo’s father was digging the big hole? What does Billie Jo think that his purpose is?

2. This section begins with “The Dream.” Write about how the shape of the lines corresponds to the action of playing the piano. Compare these lines with the lines in “On Stage” in Winter 1934. Then tell how the section shows something important about Billie Jo’s recovery from her burns. Do you think her dream will come true? Tell why or why not.

3. Do you know of someone who has had to adjust to and overcome a challenging physical problem? Write about this person, and how he or she has faced the challenges.

B. What were your predictions, questions, observations, and connections as you read? Write about one of them in your journal. Check the response you chose.

☐ Prediction    ☐ Question    ☐ Observation    ☐ Connection
Out of the Dust
Summer 1935

For Your Discussion Group

∑ Discuss why Billie Jo runs away from home. What is she trying to escape? What does she hope to find?

∑ What does Billie Jo learn from the man who travels with her in the railway car? Why does the man’s story convince Billie Jo to return home?

∑ What understanding do Billy Jo and her father reach? What does Billie Jo want her dad to do for her, and what does she want him to do for himself? Why is it often hard to ask for important things like these, even from those we love?

Writer’s Craft: Conflict and Climax

Good stories engage you because the writer presents a conflict or problem that the main character has to solve. In this section, Billie Jo’s conflict is how she should respond to the destruction of the farmland and to her father’s reaction to it. Should she move to a less harsh environment, or should she remain in the Dust Bowl?

After presenting readers with the conflict, writers move on to the climax. The climax of the story comes when the main character makes a major decision. In this case, Billie Jo decides to go back home and stick with her dad. Everything else that follows in the story will result from Billie Jo’s climactic decision. What might the climax have been if she had decided to keep traveling west?
Out of the Dust
Autumn 1935

Reading Strategy:
Recognizing the Importance of the Title

When you finish a book, its title often takes on a greater meaning for you than it had when you began. By now, you probably sense that the title of this book can be interpreted in more than one way. There is the literal meaning, which is what the words in the title actually describe. And there is the symbolic meaning, which is what the title stands for or represents. Take some time to think about the title, and how your understanding of it has changed as you read. What does the title mean to you now?

Writing in Your Literature Response Journal

A. Write about one of these topics in your journal. Circle the topic you chose.

1. Browse through the book, and then decide on a new title for it. Design a new cover that enhances your title. Write a list of reasons why the new title is effective.

2. What do you think of Louise? How does she handle things so that Billie Jo finally makes friends with her?

3. It’s not always easy for an established family to accept a new person who moves in. Write about a similar situation that you know about. What were the problems? If the problems were eventually solved, tell how.

B. What were your predictions, questions, observations, and connections as you read? Write about one of them in your journal. Check the response you chose.

☐ Prediction  ☐ Question  ☐ Observation  ☐ Connection
Out of the Dust
Autumn 1935

For Your Discussion Group

In this section, Billie Jo and her father change their behavior and attitudes in several ways. For example, Billie Jo’s dad decides to seek medical help for the spots on his skin, and Billie Jo learns how she can recover from the burns on her hands. Of course, healing can mean taking care of emotional problems as well as physical ones. Identify and discuss clues that indicate that Billie Jo and her dad are healing their relationship.

In the setting of this story, the land needs to be healed, too. What does Billie Jo’s father learn about possible ways to care for his farmland so it will be productive again? How is the pond a sign of healing?

How is Louise part of the healing process? Predict how her presence will affect Billie Jo’s life.

Writer’s Craft: Developing Themes

Theme means the major idea(s) that a story conveys about life. A writer doesn’t usually spell out a theme directly. It’s up to readers to discover the theme or themes for themselves. Two themes in Out of the Dust are that 1) family is important and 2) by dealing with hardships, you discover your strengths and weaknesses. Think about other themes that are developed in Out of the Dust. Write the themes in your journal, and then share and discuss them with your group.
Out of the Dust

After Reading

In this book, readers experience the Dust Bowl years from Billie Jo’s point of view. We see the world through her eyes. Billie Jo talks about many important subjects, some of which are listed in the chart below. Find passages in the book in which she speaks about these subjects. Quote the passages, and give their page numbers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUBJECT</th>
<th>PAGE NUMBER(S)</th>
<th>PASSAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture and farming</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving and receiving help</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Meet with your group, and compare your charts. You probably have identified several different passages as examples of each subject. Take turns reading aloud the passages you selected.

Work together to summarize the major things you’ve learned from this book about the Dust Bowl years.
Individual Projects

1. Research modern-day dust bowls to find out how they have developed. Compare these dust bowls to the American Dust Bowl of the 1930s. Create a report that includes text, maps, photos, and illustrations. A good place to start is by going to The Weather Doctor Almanac for June 2002 Web site:


2. In the spring of 1940, the musician Woody Guthrie recorded “Dust Bowl Ballads.” Ask your librarian or teacher to help you locate a copy of this CD (Rounder CD 1040). After listening to the songs, think about whether the music deepened your understanding of the setting of Out of the Dust. Write a review of the CD, and share it with your class.

3. Billie Jo’s journal consists of important events that happened over a period of two years. Construct a looking-back journal of your own that summarizes the most important events in your life for the past two years. Like all journals, this is one you may choose to share with others or keep private.

Group Projects

1. Billie Jo frequently mentions President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Find out more about this president. Find a copy of FDR’s first inaugural address. With whom did Roosevelt’s sympathies lie? What situation did he hope to cure? How did FDR propose to do it? Research the programs that Roosevelt put into place to help people recover from the Depression. Present your findings to your classmates.

2. In her journal, Billie Jo refers to the Lindbergh baby, the Dionne quintuplets, and the eruption of the Kilauea volcano. Research one of these events, and present your findings in the form of continuing news stories. Report on the breaking news, and then update your readers about what happens.

3. Build a readers’ theater presentation from a section from Out of the Dust. Take turns reading Billie Jo’s entries for that season to the class. Practice your reading at least once before you present it so you’ll be able to read the entry with expression and deep feeling.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Helpful Contributions</th>
<th>Unhelpful Contributions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>shares ideas</td>
<td>asks questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>