

Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse

Subjects: Dust storms—Juvenile fiction; Farm life—Oklahoma—Juvenile fiction; Depressions—1929—Juvenile Fiction; Children’s poetry

Awards: Newbery Medal Winner, Ten Best Books for Young Adults

Book Lists: Grade 7, North America



Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse is a novel based on real events and written entirely in first person free verse poetry. Poems that tell the story of a 14-year-old girl named Billie Jo Kelby, her life in Oklahoma in the 1930s, and a time in history when severe dust storms caused major ecological and agricultural destruction—the Dust Bowl.

She writes: *(Read from book, pages 31-32)*

I sensed it before I knew it was coming.
I heard it,
smelled it,
tasted it.
Dust.

While Ma and Daddy slept,
the dust came,
tearing up fields where the winter wheat,
set for harvest in June,
stood helpless.

I watched the plants,
surviving after so much drought and so much
wind,
I watched them fry,
or
flatten,
or blow away,
like bits of cast-off rags.

It wasn’t until the dust turned toward the house,
like a fired locomotive,
and I fled,
barefoot and breathless, back inside,
it wasn’t until the dust
hissed against the windows,
that Daddy woke.

He ran into the storm,
his overall half-hooked over his union suit.
“Daddy!” I called. “You can’t stop dust.”
(Close book)

It was a very tough time. The crops failed because of drought. The wind blows constantly and the dust is always in the air. Trucks, tractors and even Billie Jo’s piano are lost in the dust. Then her mother has a terrible accident, and Billie Jo feels responsible. Her music has always kept her spirits up. But now that is lost. Billie Jo is caught in the despair of the Depression and the bleakness of the Dust Bowl. Will she have the courage to endure, *(Hold up book)* to rise *Out of the Dust*?