

Ages 10-12

Children's Book Reviews


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Review: Out of the Dust (Revised)

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Out of the Dust

By Karen Hesse

Scholastic, 1997

DESCRIPTION

Billie Jo's family works hard to scratch out a living in the Oklahoma Panhandle. Times are hard, but Billie Jo and her mother find pleasure in playing the piano. Disaster strikes however when her mother and a new baby die and her own hands are injured in a kitchen fire. Not only does she lose her mother, but she has loses the ability to play her beloved piano, and her father isolates himself in his own grief. All of this happens within the context of the dust storms which blew across Oklahoma in the 1930s destroying crops and forcing families from their homes. Dust ruins the crops and seeps through every crack and crevice. While many in their community flee this devastation, Billie Jo's family struggles to survive and through the difficulties, this young girl emerges as a courageous young heroine finding peace amidst the storms of the landscape and the turbulence in her heart.

CRITIQUE

Karen Hesse tells the story of Billie Joe in a conversational tone as if we were eavesdropping on the young girl's internal musings. The sparse free verse proves an excellent vehicle to describe the bareness of the lives of those caught in the dust storm disaster of the 1930s. Although there is an abundance of sadness in this book, it ends with hope as Billie Jo comes to understand her father's innate strength and the importance of staying close as a family. This book would be useful to spark discussion about the Great Depression and its effect on individual families and our nation. It also could be used to encourage students to express their feelings through poetry.

RELATED SUBJECTS:

1930s, Death of parent, Dust Bowl Era, Dust storms, Fathers-daughter relationships, Farm life, Great Depression, Grief, Handicaps, Oklahoma, Poetry, Poverty, Survival, United States history

CHARACTER THEMES:

Caring, Coping, Courage, Determination, Dignity, Endurance, Family love, Forgiveness, Hope, Persistence, Resilience, Resolve, Responsibility, Steadfastness, Strength, Survival, Trustworthiness, Work ethic

AWARDS:

ABC Best Books for Young Readers, Alaska Battle of the Books, Best Children's Book of the Year (Bank Street), Booklist Editor's Choice: Books for Youth, Books to Read Aloud to Children of All Ages, Buckeye Children's and Teen Book Award (OH), Capitol Choices (DC), Charlie May Simon Children's Book Award, Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Book Award (VT), Golden Archer Award (WI), Great Stone Face Book Award (NH), Indian Paintbrush Book Award (WY), Jefferson Cup (VA), Maine Student Book Award, Mark Twain Award (MO), Massachusetts Children's Book Award, Newbery Medal, Notable Children's Books, Quahog Book Award (ME), Read Alouds Too-Good-To-Miss, Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction, Sequoyah Book Award (OK), Soaring Eagle Book Award (WY), Teacher's Choices, William Allen White Children's Book

Award (KS), Wisconsin Battle of the Books, YALSA Best Books for Young Adults, Young Reader's Choice Award (Pacific Northwest Library Association)