A Study Guide for Grades 5 to 9
Prepared by Charlotte S. Jaffe and Barbara T. Doherty
Illustrated by Karen Sigler
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This study guide is based on the book Out of the Dust. Copyright © 1997 by Karen Hesse Published by Scholastic, Inc., New York
Out of the Dust  
Written by Karen Hesse

STORY SUMMARY

On an Oklahoma farm amid The Dust Bowl and The Great Depression, fourteen-year-old Billie Jo Kelby struggles with everyday life. The once successful family farm now barely produces enough to provide the basics. Billie Jo’s mother, who is expecting another child, struggles to make ends meet. Her father battles the drought and dust to bring crops to harvest. In addition to all of this hardship, Billie Jo deals with the issues facing every teenager: school studies, friendships, and parental control. Her one source of contentment is her piano playing. She is very talented and is invited to play professionally. In this way Billie Jo is able to add to the family income in a small way. Billie Jo enjoys playing so much, she’d play for nothing! Playing the piano brings her strength, relief, and pleasure.

When tragedy strikes the Kelby farm, it leaves Billie Jo both physically handicapped and emotionally adrift. While recovering from her own injuries, she must grieve for her dead mother and infant brother. The happiness and sense of freedom that playing the piano brought her also is taken from her. Billie Jo’s injuries prevent her from playing the piano. She is very unhappy and is almost a stranger to her father. Finally, unable to live this way any longer, Billie Jo runs away. While she is fleeing Oklahoma, she realizes that she and her father really love and need each other. She returns home, and she and her father rebuild their life with the help of her father’s friend Louise.
Meet the Author
Karen Hesse

Award-winning author Karen Hesse’s life began on August 29, 1952, in Baltimore, Maryland, a long way from the dust bowl of Oklahoma that she so vividly described in her novel. Her childhood was uneventful, but Karen often experienced loneliness in her family’s city row house. As a result, she turned to reading. A favorite book, John Hershey’s *Hiroshima*, had a profound effect on her. “If more books for children existed at that time with real issues, I don’t think I would have felt so lonely or isolated. I write now for children like the child I was, to show young readers that they are not alone in this world.”

In 1971, at the age of nineteen, Karen married Randy Hesse. They now have two daughters, Kate and Rachel. The author received a BA degree from the University of Maryland in 1975, and after graduating, she worked for the university as a Leave Benefit Coordinator. Her career path was varied. She became a teacher, a librarian, an advertising secretary, a typesetter, and a proofreader. Karen also enjoyed writing poetry. She began to write books for children. Three books are picture books for young readers. They include: *Poppy’s Chair, Lester’s Dog*, and *Sable*. Karen’s writing has earned her a number of awards. *Wish on a Unicorn* was named a 1992 Book of Distinction, *Letters from Rifka* won the Christopher Medal and other awards, *The Music of the Dolphins* was named a Best Book in 1996, and *Out of the Dust* was awarded the prestigious Newbery Medal.

A 1993 auto trip to Kansas inspired the author to write *Out of the Dust*. “The wind never stopped blowing there. It caressed our faces and whispered in our ears. The colors were unlike any I had ever encountered on the east coast.” Karen began her research for the book with the help of the Oklahoma Historical Society. She spent months researching and reliving the desperate times of the Depression and the dust bowl before beginning her writing.

Karen Hesse and her family reside in Williamsville, Vermont. She is active in local writers’ groups and often volunteers at a nearby hospice.
Oklahoma, located in the Great Plains, became the 46th state in 1907. The state was formed by uniting Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory. It was nicknamed the Sooner State because many settlers tried to enter the territory sooner than legally allowed. The capital city is Oklahoma City. Another important city is Tulsa.

There are three main regions of Oklahoma: the Interior Highlands in the east; the Coastal Plain, which goes from Texas to the Gulf of Mexico; and the Interior Plains, which includes the Central Lowland and the High Plains. There are ten subregions. Three of the regions are mountainous: the Ouachita, the Arbuckle, and the Wichita Mountains; they are in the southern part of the state. The Ozark Plateau, mostly in Missouri and Arkansas, has rough terrain. The Sandstone Hills, in the east central part of the state, and the Gypsum Hills, located in the west, are two other areas. The last four are flat to rolling: the Red River Plains, the Prairie Plains, the Red Beds region, and the High Plains.

The High Plains Region is in the northwest and the Panhandle regions of the state. It has the highest elevation and the least moisture. The elevation ranges from about 2,000 feet to about 5,000 feet above sea level. Black Mesa, at 4,973 feet, is part of the High Plains.

Until about 1950, Oklahoma was mainly an agricultural state, and agriculture is still very important today. Winter wheat, cotton, and beef cattle are its most important products. Hay, corn, sorghum grain, soybeans, and peanuts are also important.

Among the manufacturing industries that have gained importance are petroleum and coal. Nonelectrical machinery, food products, metal products, and rubber and plastic products are also important.

The National Cowboy Hall of Fame is located in Oklahoma City. Another interesting site is the Will Rogers Memorial in Claremore. Will Rogers, a famous humorist, was from Oklahoma.
Pre-Reading Activity

The Dust Bowl

The Dust Bowl is the name given to an area of the United States where in the 1930s severe and repeated dust storms occurred. The most affected states were Texas, Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, and New Mexico. However, damaging effects were also experienced in parts of Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Nebraska. Dust storms occur when the top layers of soil are not held in place and are free to be moved around. Normally, the root systems of grasses, trees, and other ground cover hold the soil in place. Trees, shrubs, and bushes also break the wind, diminishing the power of some winds.

During World War I, Oklahoma and other states experienced an economic boom. There was a great demand all over the world for wheat and other grains, as well as for beef cattle. Many farmers bought more land to expand their farms and take advantage of the good prices for farm products. Farmers overused their land. They allowed too many cattle to graze on the wild grasses of the prairies. The overgrazing and overcultivation were poor farming practices. When drought conditions occurred along with the poor farming practices, the result was the Dust Bowl.

After World War I ended, there was no longer such demand for U.S. farm products, and the profits fell sharply. The value of farmland fell about 40% in five years. To escape the situation, tens of thousands of people migrated to California and to the south from Texas, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Nebraska.

The dust storms of 1934 were so severe that the clouds of dust were carried all the way to the east coast of the U.S. and to the Gulf of Mexico. When such a storm happens, it is very hard to see, even short distances. People and animals have difficulty breathing, and plants are sometimes buried under the powdery drifts.

Finally, in the late 1930s and 1940s enough rain fell to allow the area to partially recover. Dust storms happened again in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Because of somewhat improved farming practices and technology, however, none of these were as devastating as the storms of the 1930s.

John Steinbeck wrote a very famous book about this period in America: The Grapes of Wrath. It was later made into a movie. Although this is a fictionalized version of the events, it is for the most part accepted as accurate.