

Unit for Ed 325
Children's Literature
Lindsey Paul
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Out of the Dust
by Karen Hesse
Grades 7 - 8

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227 pages

To the Teacher

Out of the Dust is a story of tragedy and adjustment. Billie Joe, the main character is faced with much adversity, as she is growing up in 1930's in the dust bowl during the Depression. Children will enjoy this book, not only for its moving story, but also for it's interesting format.

Out of the Dust is a unique novel for its use of diary entries to tell the story. These diary entries are written in the form of free verse poetry. Much information and feeling are contained in the poem/diary entries, which provide a great opportunity for students to gain an appreciation for this form of literature.

A brief synopsis of the book is as follows:

Billie Joe Kelby, age 14, and her family live on a farm in the Oklahoma dust bowl during the Great Depression. The story covers the time from the winter of 1934 to the Autumn of 1935. Her and her father are involved in a tragic accident that kills her mother and now they must move on and still survive the depression, while carrying the guilt of the accident. As a result, Billie Joe's father becomes very withdrawn from her and she is left to take care of herself.

How to Follow Lesson Plans

The lesson plans are very flexible. Some lessons contain topics for research; this is because this book is very historical and it often includes references to something that most students will not be familiar with, but are important for understanding the story. I suggest that these topics be given in turn to students for research and then presented to the class before the lesson is read. Vocabulary and questions are given for the students to complete either in class or out of class, as well as discussion topics for the teacher to use as a guide. Activities are not given for every lesson, but extra activities are listed at the end which can be included if an activity is desired. You may feel that some of the questions given are too in-depth; they can easily be simplified.

Lesson 1 Winter 1934 pages 3 - 15

Vocabulary

fierce –
panhandle –
fidgety –
scowling –
riled –

Research Topic

Warm Springs Foundation

Questions

- 1) The poems in this book are written in the first person point-of-view and in the form of diary entries. Describe Billie Joe Kelby from what she tells about herself in *Beginning: August 1920*. (Include age and physical/emotional characteristics)
- 2) How did Billie Joe get her name?
- 3) Describe Billie's relationship with her father and mother. Is it a close relationship?
- 4) Who is Livie? How does Billie Joe feel about her leaving?
- 5) Billie Joe gets her mother to let her play at the Palace Theatre on Wednesday night. Was Billie Joe right in what she did? Find a Scripture passage that helps describe how we and Billie should treat our parents.
- 6) *On Stage* is different than most of the other poems because of its structure. Describe the poem's structure and tell how it helps us feel how Billie Joe felt when she played at the Palace. (3 to 5 sentences)
- 7) What kind of music do think Billie Joe plays?

Discussion Topic

Discuss the harshness of life for Billie's family and others. Focus on how they find joy despite the hardships. It may also be a good time to discuss the people's relationship with their president, FDR, since he is mentioned throughout the book.

Lesson 2 Winter 1934 pages 16-33

Vocabulary

oilcloth –
spindled –
dazzled –

Research Topics

Bounty of 1931
Loans from FDR

Questions

- 1) Did Mr. Hardly cheat Billie Joe at the store? What did she do about it?
- 2) *In Fifty Miles South of Home*, Billie writes very little, but that does not mean that it is of little importance to her. Why do you think that she wrote about the wind storm in Amarillo? What does this say about the real concerns of the people who lived in the dust bowl?
- 3) What are ma's rules for dining? What do you think about "chewing your milk?"
- 4) List a few of the things that we learn about ma and pa in *Dazzled*.
- 5) How did Billie do on the state tests? Is Billie content with how her ma reacts to the news? What does she wish for?
- 6) *Fields of Flashing Light* describes a typical dust storm. Retell what a storm is like in your own words.

Discussion Topic

Discuss ma's generosity and honesty despite her own poverty and how we can apply that to our present lives.

In Class Activity

Have three students act out the scene in *Debts* (Billie Joe, mom, and pa). After, have them discuss the difference between dad's hope and ma's realism.

Lesson 3 Spring 1934 pages 37-51

Vocabulary

dazed –
bittering –
quaking –
simmering –

Research Topics

Madame Butterfly
banks following the stock market crash

Questions

- 1) What are ma's ideas for their farm? What does Billie's dad, Bayard think about them?
- 2) What "Great War off in France" did Bayard fight in? Name one of the few things he will talk about concerning the war.
- 3) In *Apples*, Billie Joe uses repetition of the word "and." What effect does this have on the poem? (What kind of picture does it paint in your mind?)
- 4) On Sunday, after the dust, rain came, but it is "rain that was no blessing." Why? Answer Billie Joe's question, "Who fared better?"
- 5) On what conditions does Ma let Billie Joe go on the road with Arley?

In Class Activity

Have three students read aloud, *Give Up on Wheat*. Have them discuss ma's novel ideas and dad's obstinance to them.

Activity

The piano is a good distraction from the dust for Billie. What things do you do to distract yourself from a problem? Write a short essay of 50 words.

Discussion Topics

Discuss the difference in Billie's diary entries when describing hardships compared to her entries describing things that bring happiness like playing piano and ma's apple tree.

Vocabulary

kerosene –
chafed –
carcasses –
cereus plant –

Research Topics

Dionne Quintuplets
Eruption of Kilauea

Questions

- 1) The summer starts out full of hope, however, an accident changes everything. Who does Billie blame for the accident? How would you feel if you were Billie?
- 2) What creature is responsible for the damage in *Devoured*? How is that meaningful considering what happened soon after?
- 3) Billie Joe's ma gave birth to a boy that died soon after. Thinking back to the very first poem, how do you think Billie's Joe dad felt about this?
- 4) How would you feel if you were Billie Joe and overheard the women saying such things about you?
- 5) After the accident, the relationship changed between Billie and her dad. How? Does this change make sense? Why or Why not?
- 6) Why do you think that pa is really digging the hole beside the house?

Activity

Describe the chronological events that led to the Depression and the dust bowl according to *The Path of Our Sorrow*. What does the phrase, "Such a sorrow doesn't come suddenly, there are a thousand steps to take before you get there," mean?

Discussion Topics

This lesson contains the accident which changes the course of Billie Joe's and her father's lives. It is critical for the students to pay close attention to the changes in their attitude toward each

other and their lives.

Discuss forgiveness and dealing with feelings of resentment – Billie says that she can almost forgive her father for taking the money and getting drunk, but not for the pail of kerosene.

Discuss how Billie's father handled the tragedy badly by getting drunk and not turning to God as he should have.

Life is hard for Billie Joe and her family and it only goes from bad to worse. This is a good opportunity to discuss how God's plan for us may be too big for us to see and how problems seem to just compound with no end in sight, but that we can be confident that Jesus is right with us the whole way.

Vocabulary

infantile paralysis –

- 1) How has Billie's attitude changed toward her hands and the piano?
- 2) Billie Joe felt very deeply about the art she saw at the exhibit. How would you feel if you could not see such things like art? What are some other things that we often take for granted? (List at least 2)
- 3) Billie took the state tests again. Remember back to how Billie reacted to what her mom said about how she did and compare it to how Billie feels now.
- 4) What happens to Joe De La Flor's cows? Does he still have hope for the rest of them?
- 5) Billie begins to mention in her entries that her ma is "haunting" her. What does she mean by that? What do you think that she can do about it?
- 6) Using descriptions found in *Outlined by Dust*, explain what Billie means by "I'm my father's daughter." Why is she thinking about this?

Activity

At the art exhibit, Billie Joe sees pictures of her home country when the ground was lush and green. Draw and color a picture of Billie Joe's farm before and after the land turned to dust.

Discussion Topic

Billie and her father are trying to move away from the past tragedies and deal with the continued stress of the waterless, dusty land. Discuss the ever changing relationship of Billie Joe and her father along with the ups and downs of living in such a harsh environment (rain, heat, dust...)

Vocabulary

migrants –
moonshine –

Research Topics

Lindbergh baby
government food
dust pneumonia
migrants

Questions

- 1) The birth of the baby affects Billie Joe deeply. What are the feelings that she needs to just “walk off?”
- 2) Describe how Billie Joe felt after getting third place in the Palace Theatre competition? How did her hands feel afterwards?
- 3) Why was Billie Joe desperate to get home in *Dust Storm*?
- 4) Describe how Billie Joe feels about her mother from what she says in *Motherless*. How does this compare to her feelings when her mother was alive? Do people often feel the way Billie did, after they lose a loved one?

Activity

Write a diary entry in which you are a member of Buddy William’s family. Either write how you feel about living at the schoolhouse, or look back to events which led up to their homelessness. Be creative and write whatever you feel will make us see what life was like for many people at that time.

Make Apple Pandowdy (see recipe) for the children to eat in class or have them help make it.

Discussion Topic

Discuss the last poem, *Following in His Steps*, where Billie touches on feelings of wanting to run away from her problems in moving to a different place or by death. Have the students think of passages, which comfort us and tell us how we need to put all trust in God.

Apple Pandowdy

single pie crust dough
6 cups peeled, cored, & sliced apples (about 6 medium-sized)
1/2 cup maple syrup
1/4 cup packed dark brown sugar
1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1 teaspoon ground nutmeg
1/2 teaspoon ground ginger
5 tablespoons butter, melted

Preheat oven to 350°F.

Heavily butter an 9" x 13" baking dish.

Roll the dough out 1/4" thick, cut into pieces.

Spread apples evenly in the baking dish.

Drizzle with maple syrup.

Combine brown sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg, and ginger.

Sprinkle on top of the apples.

Lay the pastry strips over the apples.

Brush with the butter.

Bake 30 minutes.

Remove from oven and stir the crust into the pie.

Bake 30 minutes more or until apples are soft and the crust is golden brown.

Serve with light whipping cream.

Vocabulary

warped –
rickety –
sulking –
desperation –
hospitality –

Research Topics

Black Sunday

Questions

- 1) It sounds like Billie Joe seems to have lost hope for the future in *Heartsick*. How should a Christian act in such a situation as hers?
- 2) What are the spots that Billie's father has on his skin? (The last line of *Skin* is a clue)
- 3) The dust halted the mail. What letter was delayed in the mail, because of this?
- 4) "Mad Dog scooped a handful of dust, like a boy in a sandpit. He said, 'I love this land, no matter what.' I looked at his hands. They were scarless." Why do think Billie noted that his were scarless?

Activity

Many, many people decided to leave Oklahoma and head West. They did not have large moving vans like we have today. Write a short story describing your move out of the dust bowl. Where would you go? What would you take? How would you get your possessions there? (You may have to do some research)

Discussion

In this section we get insight into how other people view the Depression and how it affects them (Mad Dog, migrants, Mr. Kingsbury, the mail train, and the funeral goers).

Lesson 8 Spring 1935 pages 172-189

Vocabulary

idled –

brontosaurus –

Research Topics

FERA

Uncle Sam

CCC

Questions

- 1) Why do you think father saved Aunt Ellis' invitation?
- 2) At the beginning of the section, Billie Joe feels like she let someone down. Who did she let down? How?
- 3) Why do you think that someone would just leave a baby in the church? How is this related to the Depression?
- 4) Many dinosaur fossils were found during this time in the dust bowl region. Why?
- 5) Billie Joe says that, "I ought to get out before my own bones turn to stone." What does this mean?

Activities

Find out about an archaeological discovery that took place during this time.

Have the students research one of FDR's programs, such as the CCC. Have them describe what problems they needed to correct and how they worked.

Discussion Topic

Compare the daily events of life in the dust bowl and Depression are from what we experience each day. Use the vast change in weather, the Sunday afternoon in the Amarillo Hotel, the dinosaur bones, and the abandoned baby.

Lesson 9 Summer 1935 pages 193-206

Vocabulary

bitterness –
tumbleweed –

Questions

- 1) Personification is a figure of speech in which a thing, quality, or idea is represented by human characteristics. In *The Dream*, Billie Joe personifies the piano as her mother. What characteristics of her mother does she find in the piano?
- 2) How many months has it been since Ma died (look in *Midnight Truth*). What is Billie Joe's relationship with her dad and what are her feelings toward her ma?
- 3) Why does Billie leave? Is she moving toward a goal or is she running away from something?
- 4) In *Gone West*, who do you think the girl is that Billie recognizes?
- 5) Why do you think Billie decided to come home? Put yourself in Billie's shoes and decide for yourself if you would come home or stay in Flagstaff.
- 6) How is Billie's decision to come home a turning point in the story?

Activity

Write a diary entry that Billie Joe's father wrote after he discovered Billie Joe was gone.

Discussion Topics

Discuss Billie's leaving (something she had longed for through much of the book) and her return (realization that it wasn't what she wanted).

In *Met*, Billie forgives her father and herself. What does God have to say about guilt and forgiveness?

Lesson 10 Autumn 1935 209-227

Vocabulary

mottled –
ointment –
betrothal –
sorghum –
diversification –
comical –

Questions

- 1) Describe Billie and her father's new relationship.
- 2) Does Billie like the "other woman?" What is she concerned that Louise will do?
- 3) Daddy and Billie took Aunt Ellis' invitation, tore it into strips, and marked the poems that ma had liked best. What does this signify to you?
- 4) In *Thanksgiving List*, poppies are set to bloom on ma and Franklin's grave. Poppies were mentioned in one of the earlier entries; how are the two instances related?
- 5) How does the story end? (Make sure to mention the significance of daddy's choice of growing different crops, Louise, and the piano.)

Activity

Name 5 things that Billie Joe is thankful for. Make your own list of 5 things that you are thankful for.

Discussion Topics

Discuss Billie and her dad's adjustment to having another woman in their lives and how they gradually open their lives to each other.

Discuss the resolution of the story, particularly focusing on *Finding a Way*.

Other Activities

Have the students take a shorter poem from the book and have them write a paragraph or two to replace it. This will let them see how poetry can be short, but packed with ideas, feelings, and much information.

Throughout the book, specific locations are mentioned. The students may find it helpful to place labeled push-pins in the named locations. This will help them to visualize what region of the country was involved with the dust bowl.

Try playing Depression-era music while students work on questions and activities.

Have the students interview a person who remembers the Great Depression and compare their memories with Billie Joe's experiences.

Have the students make charts showing the radical changes in prices and environment in U.S. during this time.

Give the students this scenario: Imagine a dust storm blows through your town and in your neighborhood. Describe what it might look like and all the items that would be damaged by the storm. Also, describe what precautions you would take if you knew a storm was coming. Draw a picture of your neighborhood after a dust storm if you would like.

Have the students make a diorama of Billie Joe's farm including the house, pond, and apple trees.

What would life be like in the Dust Bowl? How would it feel to go to bed on clean sheets at night and dusty sheets in the morning and dust in your teeth and eyes? Write a short description of what your life would be like. Be sure to include the after effects of a dust storm. What precautions could you take?

Assignment: Choose one or more of these pictures and write a story using them and characters found in Out of the Dust or a character of your own creation. Try to include historical information that you learned during this book. The story may be as long as you want, as long as it is over 200 words...

