

Out of the Dust Study Guide

by Judy Cook

For the novel by
Karen Hesse

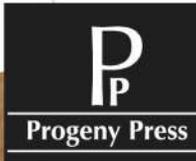
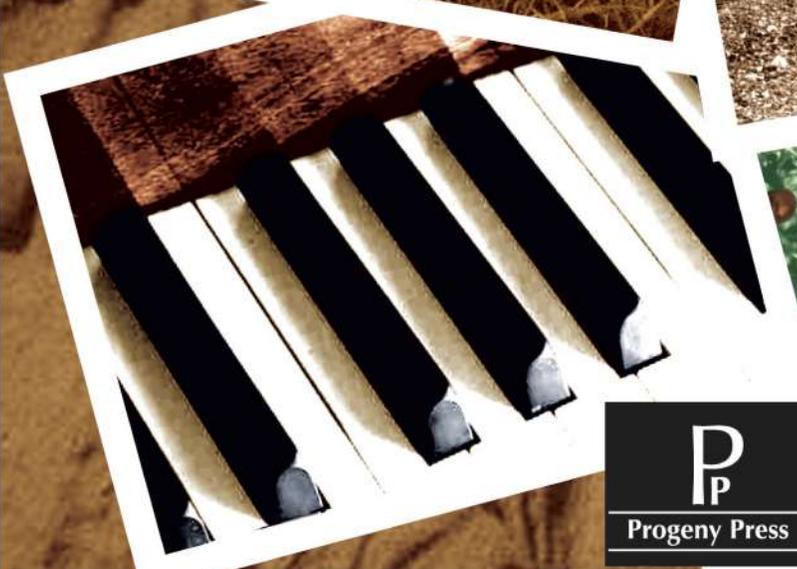
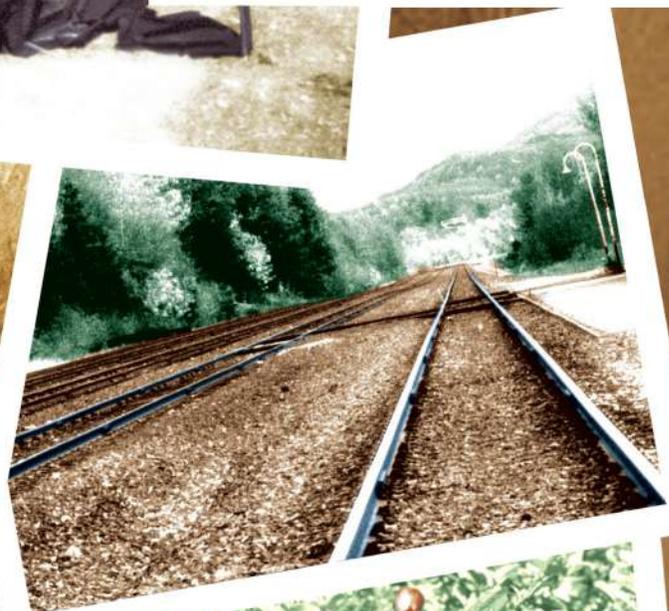


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Synopsis

Out of the Dust is the story of a teenage girl growing up in Oklahoma during the Great Depression. She and her family endure the hardships associated with the raging dust storms, poor economy, and difficult living conditions.

Billie Jo Kelby is an only child—her mother has endured numerous miscarriages. Though she knows he loves her, she believes her father views her as a substitute for the son he really wanted. Billie Jo is a good student, but her true joy is playing the piano. Billie Jo's piano playing leads to a job with a local musical group and gives her the opportunity to bring home a little money for the family. When her mother reveals that she is pregnant again, and the pregnancy seems to be going well, the family is hopeful. Despite the hardships of dust and depression, Billie Jo and her mother and father are a relatively happy family.

However, tragedy strikes during an ordinary day. A bucket of kerosene, mistaken for a pail of water, leads to a terrible fire. Billie Jo's mother is horribly burned, and Billie Jo suffers serious burns herself when she tries to extinguish the fire with her bare hands.

Billie Jo and her father blame themselves and each other for the tragedy. Her father sinks into a deep depression, and Billie Jo retreats into numb self pity. She begins to dream of going somewhere else, out of the dust. The terrible storms continue as Billie Jo and her father drift further apart.

Eventually, Billie Jo leaves her home and father; but in leaving she discovers that answers and peace do not come from trying to escape from bad circumstances. Answers are not always given or found, and peace comes from facing her problems.

Spring 1934 and Summer 1934

Poetic Devices:

Figurative Language

1. *Sensory Images*—poetry appeals to our senses in ways that no other type of literature can. Poets try to help us see the world in a new way by allowing us to experience things through their words. Give examples of how Ms. Hesse appeals to each of our five senses through her words:
 - a. *Visual images* appeal to what we see. Find an example of a visual image in “Hope in a Drizzle”:
 - b. *Auditory images* appeal to what we hear. Find an example of an auditory image in “On the Road with Arley”:
 - c. *Olfactory images* appeal to what we smell. Find an example of an olfactory image in “Birthday”:
 - d. *Gustatory images* appeal to what we taste. Find an example of a gustatory image in “Apples”:

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11. How did Billie Jo's father react to the pain of his wife? Why would he choose to do what he did? What tasks were forced upon Billie Jo as a result of his choice?

12. What motivates Daddy to begin digging behind the house? What is Daddy's greatest need after the accident?

13. In what ways is the relationship between Billie Jo and her father changing?

14. Poets and authors often use *symbolism* in their stories by using an object (a symbol) to stand for a significant, often abstract idea. Look at the cereus plant in "Night Bloomer." What might the plant symbolize?

Dig Deeper:

15. Think about what the neighbors said while they were attending to the body of Ma. How did they deeply wound Billie Jo? Read Proverbs 11:9; 12:25; 16:24; 17:9, 22. What does the Bible say about the effect of our words?

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Read Matthew 7:1–4. How does this passage apply to Billie Jo’s attitude toward her father? How might it apply to *our* attitude to Billie Jo?

18. People tend to like things to be neat and orderly, to be able to see cause and effect, to be able to assign responsibility. When bad things happen, we like to be able fix the blame, because bad things are not supposed to happen. Does Billie Jo follow this pattern? Read Ecclesiastes 9:11, Luke 13:1–5. What do these verses illustrate about the need to assign blame for tragedy?

Optional Activities:

1. *Discussion:* A horrible thing has happened in Billie Jo’s life, and she is having trouble adapting to it and acting in a Christian manner. If you were her classmate or friend, how would you deal with her? Is it right to expect her to forgive her father and herself right away?
2. Do some research on the grieving process and write a two- to three-page paper on how people grieve and the responses they go through.
3. Invite a pastor or counselor to your class to discuss grief and the personal struggles it causes. Allow an open discussion. An alternative may be to interview such a person. [If possible, ask him or her to read this portion of the book before the discussion.]
4. Research current anti-erosion and crop rotation practices. Create a display demonstrating and explaining how they work.

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Thinking About the Story:

6. Billie Jo can hardly be in the same room with Ma's piano; she feels like Ma is haunting her. The piano was her mother's and the playing of it seemed to be one of their greatest connections and also one of their greatest sources of friction. Billie Jo may feel guilty, angry, or sorry that she can still play, but her mother is gone; she may feel guilty that she can't play as well as she used to; she may feel guilty that she used to argue with her mother over her playing; or the piano may just remind her too much of her mother.

7. Ma would have understood why Billie Jo wanted to know and Billie Jo would not have felt alienated for wondering. Ma connected Billie Jo to the community.

8. Answers will vary. Some examples of thoughts of escaping are: "First Rain": "swearing I'll leave this forsaken place"; "Time to Go": "I ran half a mile in their dust to catch them. . . . 'Wait for me,' I cried"; "Motherless": "then I think I wouldn't be so eager to go"; "Following in His Footsteps": "But I'd like to go, . . . I just want to go, away, out of the dust." Billie Jo wants to get away from the dust, but she is also laboring under a heavy load of guilt, sadness, and self-pity. She seems to think things will be different for her somewhere else.

9. Answers will vary. The two words can be used interchangeably, but they can be very different, also. At the dance, the people had not physically escaped from their situations, but they were mentally free from them for awhile. One can be free in spirit even though imprisoned or enslaved. Conversely, escape from a situation will not necessarily bring freedom from it. Consider an imprisoned criminal: escaping a prison does not automatically make him a free man. Billie Jo thinks she needs escape from the conditions in her area, but what she really needs is freedom from her emotional isolation and guilt.

10. Billie Jo thinks her mother had much bigger plans than being a farmer's wife but she changed them for Billie Jo's father. Answers may vary. Billie Jo may believe that Ma settled for too little from her life with Daddy and that she compromised her own identity in the process, or she may believe that her mother had great strength or flexibility to make such changes. Billie Jo believes she either could or would never make such decisions herself. However, Billie Jo is only 14 years old and cannot know her own capabilities yet. Nor can she really know what went into or was behind her mother's actions.

11. Ashby Durwin and his friend were operating a still to manufacture illegal whiskey. Sugar is a key ingredient in the fermentation process, and the sheriff confiscated 1,000 pounds of sugar. Customarily, these types of contraband would be destroyed, but at this time sugar is too expensive for most people to afford to have very often. His dilemma, then is destroying a precious commodity or finding a good use for it. The sheriff decides to give it to the school to make sweet things for the children. Answers will vary about whether this is the right thing to do.

12. Billie Jo is saying that at first she wanted to die, but she now realizes that life continues, that she can go on. She feels glad for the rain and the happiness it will bring her father, and sometimes she feels sympathy for her father and his feelings ("I can't help thinking how it is for him, without Ma."). She takes an interest in the art exhibit, she decides to play the piano in the competition, she finds that her desire not to "go on" is fading some.

Dig Deeper:

13. For Christians, freedom comes from trusting in Christ's righteousness and paying the penalty for our sins so that we are free of guilt and God's wrath—we are spiritually free. Consequently, Christians should not be bound by or inhibited by physical restrictions because we know they are temporary and, therefore, the importance of our physical surroundings diminishes. These verses reflect this. They tell us that we rest in God's peace, that we should give our anxieties to God, that we can be content because God takes care of our needs.

14. Billie Jo plays for the talent show at the Palace Theatre and wins third place. Later she plays in Arley's show at the school and does very poorly. For the talent show she practiced until her arms hurt, and at the end of the show her hands could not hold her prizes. For Arley's show she practiced very little, just imagining the movements in her mind, and she "played like a cripple." She says "my hands are no good anymore, my playing's no good." It appears that after the first show she grew fearful of the pain in her hands. She didn't practice, and when she failed at Arley's show she decided she was finished playing the piano. Billie Jo seems afraid to try and willing to give up. She seems to view a setback as permanent rather than temporary. It shows that she is still depressed and more likely to see things from a very negative point of view and that she is afraid of the pain of working with her hands.

15. Earlier in the book, Billie Jo was having a hard time with her mother—there seemed to be a lot of friction, particularly about piano playing. She says Ma "always gets testy about me playing" ("Permission to Play"), "I don't know why she's so against my playing. . . . I know she doesn't like the kind of music I play, but sometimes I think she's just plain