

Discussion Questions on *Out of the Dust*

*Directions: After reading Karen Hesse's **Out of the Dust**, answer the following questions. These questions reinforce the following Florida Sunshine State Standards and will count four points each.*

LA.A.2.4.1 The student determines the main idea and identifies relevant details, methods of development, and their effectiveness in a variety of types of written material.

LA.A.2.4.2 The student determines the author's purpose and point of view and their effects on the text.

LA.E.2.4.1 The student analyzes the effectiveness of complex elements of plot, such as setting, major events, problems, conflicts and resolutions.

Analyzing Plot

1. What is the setting of the novel?
2. How does the setting affect the character and the events?
3. What are the conflicts of the novel?
4. Which conflicts do the end of the novel resolve?

Analyzing Character

5. Who are the two women who influence Billie Jo the most?
6. Tell how Billie Jo's mother influences her. What are some of the important things that she learns from her?
7. Tell how Billie Jo's teacher, Miss Freeland, influences her.
8. Who does Billie Jo meet in the boxcar?
9. How does he influence her?
10. Compare and contrast the man in the boxcar to Billie Jo's father.

Analyzing the Point of View

11. What is the point of view of this novel?
12. How would the novel have been different if the father had narrated it?

Analyzing the Author's Style

13. What is unusual about the style that the author used to write this novel?
14. Did this format help you as the reader get into the story and understand the main character? How?

Theme/Purpose

15. How does Billie Jo show that she has forgiven her father and herself?
16. How does her father show that he has forgiven her, himself, and the land?
17. How does the author suggest that in some ways the land has also forgiven the people for this misuse?
18. The phrase "out of the dust" appears several times in the book. At one point Billie Jo wants to escape "out of the dust," but later she says, "I can't get out of something that is inside me." How does the title of the book reflect Billie Jo as a person?
19. How does it reflect on the general experience of people at that time?
20. What is the significance of the title of the book?

Historical Aspects

21. List details from the book that depict life in the 1930's.
22. How do you think the author was able to vividly describe the dust bowl?
23. What are the most interesting facts you learned about everyday life in the 1930's?

Making Connections

24. List several disasters that have occurred in our land or other lands that might compare to the great dust storms of the 1930's.
25. How did the people in those lands cope with the disasters?

ANSWER KEY: Discussion Questions on *Out of the Dust*

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LA.E.2.4.1 The student analyzes the effectiveness of complex elements of plot, such as setting, major events, problems, conflicts and resolutions.

Analyzing Plot

1. What is the setting of the novel?
(The novel takes place in Oklahoma during the Great Dust Bowl of the 1930's.)
2. How does the setting affect the character and the events?
(The dust storms destroy fields and crops. The family faces hardships.)
3. What are the conflicts of the novel?
(Man vs. man, man vs. nature, man vs. fate, man vs. himself)
4. Which conflicts do the end of the novel resolve?
(Man vs. man- Billie Jo and her father improve their relationship. Man vs. himself- Billie Jo decides to leave the town for a little while but returns.)

Analyzing Character

5. Who are the two women who influence Billie Jo the most?
(Her mother and her teacher, Miss Freeland.)
6. Tell how Billie Jo's mother influences her. What are some of the important things that she learns from her?
(Billie Jo's mother teaches her how to behave as an adult. After the death of her mother, Billie Jo helps take care of the home and her father. She is also able to keep up her school studies. Her mother also instills a love of the piano in Billie Jo.)
7. Tell how Billie Jo's teacher, Miss Freeland, influences her.
(She serves as a substitute mother for her.)

8. Who does Billie Jo meet in the boxcar?
(A man who has deserted his family during hard times.)
9. How does he influence her?
(Billie Jo is able to open up to him. She tells him about the death of her mother and the bad relationship that she has with her father. He makes her see that her father is not so bad after all.)
10. Compare and contrast the man in the boxcar to Billie Jo's father.
(The man in the boxcar has deserted his family because of hard times. Her father stays rooted and keeps a home for her even when things are rough.)

Analyzing the Point of View

1. What is the point of view of this novel?
(The story is told in first-person main character point of view. The story is told by Billie Jo Kelby.)
2. How would the novel have been different if the father had narrated it?
(The reader would not have known the inner thoughts and feelings of Billie Jo.)

Analyzing the Author's Style

13. What is unusual about the style that the author used to write this novel?
(It is written in free-verse poetry, using rather simple language.)
14. Did this format help you as the reader get into the story and understand the main character? How?
(Answers will vary. Students tell me that it is easier for them to understand because it is easy to read and to understand, and the lines are so short. By making the lines so short, the poet emphasizes each word.)

Theme/Purpose

15. How does Billie Jo show that she has forgiven her father and herself?
(She calls him Dad again for the first time since her mother's death. She talks to him and tries to understand him. She accepts his new friend, Louise.)
16. How does her father show that he has forgiven her, himself, and the land?
(He talks to her and tries to understand her.)
17. How does the author suggest that in some ways the land has also forgiven the people for this misuse?
(The rain comes again. Billie Jo's father's pond stays full of water. The poppies grow on her mother's and Frank's graves.)

18. The phrase "out of the dust" appears several times in the book. At one point Billie Jo wants to escape "out of the dust," but later she says, "I can't get out of something that is inside me." How does the title of the book reflect Billie Jo as a person?
(She is a strong-willed young lady who is made up of everything and everyone who has ever influenced her. She ends up dealing with her problems instead of running from them.)
19. How does it reflect on the general experience of people at that time?
(Answers will vary. People learned to accept and expect the dust and just try to make the most of it. People were sometimes reluctant to leave because they were part of the dust, too.)
20. What is the significance of the title of the book?
(Billie Jo has this inner turmoil to get out of that town that was filled with dust, to leave and move out west as some of the other people have done. After Billie Jo's mother dies, she wants to leave even more. When she does finally leave, she realizes that it isn't any better, just different and lonely. She realizes that she can never be "out of the dust" because she is a part of the dust; it is the very essence of her soul.)

Historical Aspects

21. List details from the book that depict life in the 1930's.
(The dust, the drought, the hard times, the bad crops, the lack of food, the lack of work, the lack of money)
22. How do you think the author was able to vividly describe the dust bowl?
(Answers will vary. She probably did research on that time period, reading newspaper articles, etc.)
23. What are the most interesting facts you learned about everyday life in the 1930's?
(Answers will vary. Even in a disaster, life goes on.)

Making Connections

24. List several disasters that have occurred in our land or other lands that might compare to the great dust storms of the 1930's.
(Answers will vary. Hurricanes, tornadoes, droughts, volcanoes, earthquakes, and floods.) (See the following Weblink for information on the world's worst natural disasters. <http://www.exn.ca/Stories/1999/12/14/53.asp>)
25. How did the people in those lands cope with the disasters?
(Answers will vary. They united and worked together to overcome their misfortunes. Life resumed as normal as possible.)

Writing Assignment
Based on
Out of the Dust

LA.B.1.4.2 The student drafts and revises writing that is focused, purposeful, and reflects insight into the writing situation.

Directions: Rewrite one of the poems from the point of view of the father of Billie Jo. Be sure to remain focused on the topic and make sure that it reflects insight regarding conflicts and theme of the novel.

Sample Poems

Forgiveness

I can almost forgive myself
For taking my wife's money.
I could possibly forgive myself
For drinking away my troubles in Guymon.
But for as long as I am alive,
I don't believe
I will ever forgive myself
For the pail of kerosene that
I left by the side of the stove.

*Ashley Williams
Jay High School
2001*

By Ourselves

I am tired,
yet so lonely.
I am a farmer
trying to become more.
We are by ourselves,
just Billie Jo and me.
Her hands so charred,
and I, with spots,
just like my father.
The rain has come,
as well as Louise.
Everything is going great
between Billie Jo and me.

*Lizzy Hawsey
Jay High School
2001*

Filled with Sorrow

She stares at me.
Maybe she's looking for Ma.
She won't find her.
I look like her.
I stand like her,
But yet and still
I don't know her,
Or understand her.
She needs her mother, I know,
But I am just her father.
That's why I am
Filled with sorrow.

*Brandon Thompson
Jay High School
2001*

Empty Spaces

As I stare at her
across the table
through the dust,
I see hurt,
I see pain,
I see my daughter.
She looks at me different,
different than before.
We are like strangers,
sitting together in silence,
I want her to know
that I love her.
I want her to know
it's not her fault,
yet I can't tell her.
Her beautiful hands,
scarred and blistered.
Her musical talent,
taken away.
I want to talk.
I want her to know.
It's not her fault.

*Erin Jones
Jay High School
2001*

I Don't Know

I don't
I don't know
I don't know my daughter
anymore.
She sits across from me.
She looks at me.
She looks at me with what used
to be her bright, shining eyes.
Now they are nothing but dull.
I wish she wouldn't push away,
push away from the one person
she has left.
We are changing.
We change with every blow of dust.
I can't help,
I can't help but to look,
look at those burns.
They remind me.
They remind me so much of Polly.
They remind me so much,
it hurts.

*Roxanne Guice
Jay High School
2001*

My Daughter Has Left

My Daughter has left
Out of the dust.
I don't know where she's gone,
But I hope she comes home.
I've got a new friend.
Her name is Louise,
And she makes me do things
I've never done before.
If Billie Jo ever comes home,
I know she and Louise
Will get along.

*Jake Nelson
Jay High School
2001*

My Sweet Polly

I try to forget all the pain.
My sweet Polly.
My sweet, sweet Polly.
And my children
In more pain
Than me.
Why? Why
Does this have to be?
One mistake.
One little mistake goes into flames,
Causing such pain.
I heard her call for a drink
To calm that thirst.
But my thirst is more
More than before,
So I'll go tonight to quinch-
To quinch that thirst
The one from deep within.
And I'll forget all my pain,
Even the pain from the flames

*Kristin Fischer
Jay High School
2001*

Empty Spaces

I don't know about my daughter anymore.
She sits and looks at me, like she
Expects me to say something.
I don't know
What to say,
What to do.
She looks as of my likeness,
Red hair,
Long-legged,

But yet she has the hands,
Of a piano player
As her mother
Once did.

Times have changed.
I have changed.
My only child
And daughter has changed.

*Mary Boutwell
Jay High School
2001*

Out of the Dust

I don't know Billie Jo anymore.
As she sits near me,
I recognize her.
She looks like me.
Her red hair,
Her long legs,
All describe me.

I am just uncomfortable
With her.
We've parted from each other,
Since the death of Ma.

I feel sorry for her.
She used to be so talented.
Her beautiful hands
And her piano playing
Are all gone.
All 'cause of me,
I've lost her Ma
And her hands.

Gone,
Forever.

*Lindsey Floyd
Jay High School
2001*

The Empty Spaces

Billie Jo stares at me
Like I'm a stranger.
She does not know me anymore,
And I don't know her.
She acts like my daughter,
And even smiles like my daughter,
But she is not Billie Jo.
And I feel strange around her.

I can tell that she
Does not want to be alone,
And neither do I.
She cannot see it though.
She cannot see anything in me anymore.
I have changed.
She has changed,
And our relationship has changed.

Ma is gone now,
And it's as if
We are both gone, too.
Gone to our little places
To be left alone.
All that remains in our home
Is empty spaces.

She hides those horrible scars from me
Hoping that I will not see them
And remember the pain
My wife went through.
The pain my daughter went through.
But I see them,
And I remember.

*Nikki Callahan
Jay High School
2001*

Dust Bowl

Me and my daughter don't
Talk anymore,
So most of the time I'm outside
of the door.
We never talk,
And we're always apart.
Time we spend never no more,
And she's always silent cause of
A mom she has no more.
I'm always drunk and always
Alone.
She's always dreaming
And in pain because of her sores.
We act like brother and sister,
Not like daughter and dad.
She cleans and I farm,
And the dust is filling things
In our barn.

*Tray Shaw
Jay High School
2001*