

LIBRIS

We know
books

To Brenda Bowen,
who is so much more
than an editor

Out of the Dust

Karen Hesse

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FRANCES LINCOLN
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

LBRIS

We know
books

Winter 1934

Beginning: August 1920

As summer wheat came ripe,
so did I,
born at home, on the kitchen floor.
Ma crouched,
barefoot, bare bottomed
over the swept boards,
because that's where Daddy said it'd be best.

I came too fast for the doctor,
bawling as soon as Daddy wiped his hand around
inside my mouth.
To hear Ma tell it,
I hollered myself red the day I was born.
Red's the color I've stayed ever since.

Daddy named me Billie Jo.
He wanted a boy.
Instead,
he got a long-legged girl
with a wide mouth
and cheekbones like bicycle handles.
He got a redheaded, freckle-faced, narrow-hipped girl
with a fondness for apples
and a hunger for playing fierce piano.

From the earliest I can remember
I've been restless in this
little Panhandle shack we call home,
always getting in Ma's way with my
pointy elbows, my fidgety legs.
By the summer I turned nine Daddy had
given up about having a boy.
He tried making me do.
I look just like him,
I can handle myself most everywhere he puts me,
even on the tractor,
though I don't like that much.

Ma tried having other babies.
It never seemed to go right, except with me.
But this morning
Ma let on as how she's expecting again.
Other than the three of us
there's not much family to speak of.
Daddy, the only boy Kelby left
since Grandpa died
from a cancer
that ate up the most of his skin,
and Aunt Ellis,
almost fourteen years older than Daddy
and living in Lubbock,
a ways south of here,
and a whole world apart
to hear Daddy tell it.

And Ma, with only Great-uncle Floyd,
old as ancient Indian bones,
and mean as a rattler,
rotting away in that room down in Dallas.

I'll be nearly fourteen
just like Aunt Ellis was when Daddy was born
by the time this baby comes.

Wonder if Daddy'll get his boy this time?

January 1934

Mr. Noble and
Mr. Romney have a bet going
as to who can kill the most rabbits.
It all started at the rabbit drive last Monday
over to Sturgis
when Mr. Noble got himself worked up
about the damage done to his crop by jacks.
Mr. Romney swore he'd had more rabbit trouble
than anyone in Cimarron County.
They pledged revenge on the rabbit population;
wagering who could kill more.

They ought to just shut up.
Betting on how many rabbits they can kill.
Honestly!
Grown men clubbing bunnies to death.
Makes me sick to my stomach.
I know rabbits eat what they shouldn't,
especially this time of year when they could hop
halfway to Liberal
and still not find food,
but Miss Freeland says
if we keep
plowing under the stuff they ought to be eating,
what are they supposed to do?

Mr. Noble and
Mr. Romney came home from Sturgis Monday
with twenty rabbits apiece. A tie.
It should've stopped there. But
Mr. Romney wasn't satisfied.
He said,
"Noble cheated.
He brought in rabbits somebody else killed."
And so the contest goes on.

Those men,
they used to be best friends.
Now they can't be civil with each other.
They scowl as they pass on the street.
I'm scowling too,
but scowling won't bring the rabbits back.
They're all skinned and cooked and eaten by now.
At least they didn't end up in
Romney and Noble's cook pots.
They went to families
that needed the meat.

January 1934

Livie Killian moved away.
I didn't want her to go.
We'd been friends since first grade.

The farewell party was
Thursday night
at the Old Rock Schoolhouse.

Livie
had something to tease each of us about,
like Ray
sleeping through reading class,
and Hillary,
who on her speed-writing test put
an "even ton" of children
instead of an "even ten."

Livie said good-bye to each of us,
separately.
She gave me a picture she'd made of me sitting
in front of a piano,
wearing my straw hat,
an apple halfway to my mouth.

I handed Livie the memory book we'd all
filled with our different slants.

I couldn't get the muscles in my throat relaxed enough
to tell her how much I'd miss her.

Livie
helped clean up her own party,
wiping spilled lemonade,
gathering sandwich crusts,
sweeping cookie crumbs from the floor,
while the rest of us went home
to study for semester reviews.

Now Livie's gone west,
out of the dust,
on her way to California,
where the wind takes a rest sometimes.
And I'm wondering what kind of friend I am,
wanting my feet on that road to another place,
instead of Livie's.

January 1934

Arley Wanderdale,
who teaches music once a week at our school,
though Ma says he's no teacher at all,
just a local song plugger,
Arley Wanderdale asked
if I'd like to play a piano solo
at the Palace Theatre on Wednesday night.

I grinned,
pleased to be asked, and said,
"That'd be all right."

I didn't know if Ma would let me.
She's an old mule on the subject of my schooling.
She says,
"You stay home on weeknights, Billie Jo."
And mostly that's what I do.

But Arley Wanderdale said,
"The management asked me to
bring them talent, Billie Jo,
and I thought of you."

Even before Mad Dog Craddock? I wondered.

"You and Mad Dog," Arley Wanderdale said.

Darn that blue-eyed boy
with his fine face and his
smooth voice,
twice as good
as a plowboy has any right to be.
I suspected Mad Dog had come first
to Arley Wanderdale's mind,
but I didn't get too riled.
Not so riled I couldn't say yes.

January 1934

Sometimes,
when Ma is busy in the kitchen,
or scrubbing,
or doing wash,
I can ask her something in such a way
I annoy her just enough to get an answer,
but not so much I get a no.

That's a way I've found of gaining what I want,
by catching Ma off guard,
especially when I'm after permission to play piano.
Right out asking her is no good.
She always gets testy about me playing,
even though she's the one who truly taught me.

Anyway, this time I caught her in the
slow stirring of biscuits,
her mind on other things,
maybe the baby growing inside her, I don't know,
but anyhow,
she was distracted enough,
I was determined enough,
this time I got just what I wanted.
Permission to play at the Palace.

January 1934

On Stage

When I point my fingers at the keys,
the music
springs straight out of me.
Right hand
playing notes sharp as
tongues,
telling stories while the
smooth
buttery rhythms back me up
on the left.

Folks sway in the
Palace aisles
grinning and stomping and
out of breath,
and the rest, eyes shining,
fingers snapping,
feet tapping. It's the best
I've ever felt,
playing hot piano,
sizzling with
Mad Dog,
swinging with the Black Mesa Boys,
or on my own,
crazy,

pestering the keys.

That is

heaven.

How supremely

heaven

playing piano

can be.

January 1934

Birthday for F.D.R.

I played so well
on Wednesday night,
Arley put his arm across my shoulder
and asked me to come and
perform at the President's birthday ball.
Ma can't say no to this one.
It's for President Roosevelt.
Not that Mr. Roosevelt will actually be there,
but the money collected at the ball,
along with balls all over the country,
will go,
in the President's name,
to the Warm Springs Foundation,
where Mr. Roosevelt stayed once when he was sick.

Someday,
I plan to play for President Franklin Delano Roosevelt
himself.
Maybe I'll go all the way to the White House in
Washington, D.C.
In the meantime,
it's pretty nice
Arley asking me to play twice,
for Joyce City.

January 1934