Organizational Patterns

This book is divided up into seasons starting at Winter 1934 and going through Autumn 1935, two full years exactly. The seasonal sections are further broken down into individual poems. These poems can be as short as 4 lines or as long as 5 1/2 pages, though most are about a page. The poems are free verse and chronicle two years of the life of a fourteen-year-old girl, Billie Jo, growing up in the Oklahoma Panhandle during the dust bowl. The poems almost seem to be Billie Jo’s journal, one of her main ways of expressing herself.

Issues Related to the Study of Literature

 THEME ~

Roots/Home/Belonging—This is one of biggest themes of this novel. Billie Jo is obsessed for most of the book about getting away and out of the dust that covers everything, that kills the crops, and that at times threatens lives. She is convinced that anywhere else would
be better than where she is. Eventually she does run away, but then realizes that things aren't much better anywhere else and that the only thing that she had that was worth having, her father, she left back in Oklahoma. So she goes back and really starts to develop a good relationship with him. "And I know now that all the time I was trying to get / out of the dust / the fact is, / what I am, / I am because of the dust. / And what I am is good enough. / Even for me" (222).

Loss/Healing—Billie Jo loses her mother and little brother through a tragic accident with some kerosene and the stove. She has to learn how to get along without her mother, rescue her failing relationship with her father, and somehow stop blaming both herself and her father for what happened. The fact that she accomplishes these things shows that even though everything may look bleak, the sun will come out again.

Overcoming/Perseverance—In the same accident that took the life of her mother, Billie Jo’s hands are burned severely, making it practically impossible to play the piano without excruciating pain. For a while she just gives up, but, with the encouragement of her father and friends, she slowly begins playing again, despite the pain, and starts regaining some of her old skill.

SETTING ~

This novel takes place in the Oklahoma Panhandle during the dust bowl. The setting is really very important because a great many of the poems center around the dust and how much Billie Jo hates it. She finally learns that she cannot get out of the dust just by leaving. She has to rise above it, and go on in spite of it.

FOreshadowing ~

Within the first ten pages we already get the idea that Billie Jo might try to leave someday. "And I am wondering what kind of friend I am, / wanting my feet that road to another place, / instead of Livie’s" (9), and again with "Some day I'll leave behind the wind, and the
dust / and walk my way West / and make myself to home in that distant place / of green vines and promise” (59), and again with “My father will stay, no matter what, / he’s stubborn as sod. / He and the land have a hold on each other. / But what about me” (75)? Foreshadowing also occurs when Billie Jo’s father expresses a desire to go to night school where “It’s mostly ladies in those classes” (138), indicating that he is ready to find another wife, which he winds up doing at the very end of the story.

POINT OF VIEW, NARRATIVE VOICE

The story is told from Billie Jo’s point of view in the form of the poems that she writes. We follow her through two years of her life and all the events that transpire, which in the end change her life significantly. Through her eyes we get a perspective of not only her own personal struggles, but also all struggles that go with living in the dust bowl in the 1930’s.

TONE

The tone differs from poem to poem, though, most of the time, the poems sound like everyday speech from that period, and often are not exactly grammatically correct. At times her sentences are short and choppy and other times they run on and on. The variety is what makes them interesting. Most of the poems have a somewhat reflective tone to them, describing an event and then contemplating about what that event means to Billie Jo. Despite the fact that most of the poems talk the destructive power of the dust in some way, the tone is not hopeless.

IRONY

The biggest irony of the story is that although Billie Jo believes that life has to be better out of the dust, in reality the entire country was having a rough time and no place was really better than where she had come from. Another irony is that one of the biggest fears that she and her father have is to be alone, and yet by leaving she made them both be alone.
Affective Issues Related to the Work

Students can relate to Billie Jo in a number of ways:

❖ Has any student dealt with the loss of a close loved one? They may connect with Billie Jo’s feelings of blame for the death of her mother, both for herself and for her father.

❖ Billie Jo likes Mad Dog a lot, but she tries to hide it and just pass it off. Have the students ever really liked someone but were afraid to show it because they were afraid that person might not like them back, especially when the person they like is more “popular” than they are?

❖ Have any of the students lived a place where it was dry and dusting a lot of the time? They can relate to Billie Jo’s disgust for all the dirt and dust everywhere.

❖ Billie Jo longs for effusive praise from her mother for doing well in school. Have students ever felt this way? What have they done if they’ve felt that they haven’t gotten the praise they deserve?

❖ Have any of the students thought about running away until discovering that home really was the best place and that it truly isn’t better someplace else?

❖ Do any of the students play musical instruments and feel the way Billie Jo feels when she plays, “How supremely / heaven / playing piano / can be” (14).

❖ Billie Jo’s friend, Livie, moves away at the beginning of the story. How do the students feel when one of their close friends moves away? What have they done to keep in touch? Have they ever wished that they were the ones leaving instead?

❖ Billie Jo has a couple boxes full of random memorabilia and junk that she just keeps around because she hasn’t gone through them yet. Do any of the students have similar boxes at home? What do they do with the things they want to keep and remember?
Vocabulary Issues

Vocabulary should not be a huge issue in this book. Most of the words students will already know or are fairly easy to determine from context. A couple more difficult words would be “ratcheted” (32), “sorghum” (40), “combines” (48), and perhaps “kerosene” (60).

Background Knowledge

Some background that would be very useful to have for the reading of this novel is a basic understanding of the dust bowl and what conditions were like during the Great Depression, not just in the Panhandle, but all over the country. Perhaps having the students do a little research and creating posters in groups of what life was like, including pictures, stories, the titles of other books written about the same era, etc. would be a good way for them to get that background information.

Implications for Students of Diversity

Students from lower income or farming families will definitely be able to relate to this novel because of the struggles that Billie Jo’s family goes through. Joyce City, at that time, didn’t hold a lot of diversity, or at least Billie Jo doesn’t mention it, but most will be able to connect, no matter their background, because the issues that Billie Jo goes through are the same ones that kids today go through.

Gender Issues

Gender plays a large role in this novel. From the first we learn that Billie Jo’s father really wanted a boy instead of a girl and so he named her Billie Jo. When he gave up on ever having a boy, he tried to make her do by having her help with the farming, even driving the tractor. Billie Jo doesn’t mind though, and seems to be kind of a Tom-boy, although, she can be very much the girl when she wants to be.
Another gender issue worth discussing is the role of mother and father in Billie Jo's home. A couple times they get in an argument over what to do about the wheat dying and her father makes it clear that he's the farmer and he'll decide what should be planted and when. Later, however, after she dies, he takes her advice.

Central Question/Enduring Theme

The central questions of this novel are “Where is home?” “Where do I belong?” and “Where can I put down roots?” Billie Jo must figure out where she can learn to be happy. In the beginning she thinks that it is either out East where the president lives, or out West in California where it's green all the time. Eventually she learns that home is right where she is, in the dust. That's where she can put down roots. Just like Billie Jo we might have a classic case of "the-grass-is-greener-on-the-other-side" syndrome and think that where we are right now could never make us happy in the long run. But a lot of times if we just look around at what we have and what we would be giving up by leaving, we'll recognize that the best place for our roots is right where we are standing. I want my students to realize that in most cases they don't have to go anywhere else to be truly happy. Happiness is to be found right where they are.

Research Issues/Project Ideas

1. As mentioned above, students can research life during the Great Depression, especially in the dust bowl. In groups have them create posters that share some of their findings which could and should include things such as pictures, stories, maps, titles of other novels about this era, etc.
2. Have students right free verse poems, modeled after those in the novel, about significant events (or not so significant events) that have happened to them. Those who want to share can. Perhaps the class could compile their poems in a book and each student would get a copy.

3. Create a class collage of their favorite lines from the poems in the novel. Discuss why they’re their favorites and what they mean to us now.

4. Have students bring in books, pictures or other creative works that deal with the Great Depression (summaries of novels and print outs of paintings are fine) and have students share what they found. Compare and contrast these works with Out of the Dust. Is the tone different? Does it deal with a different aspect of the Depression? Who is represented? What is similar?

5. Have students research how “dust bowls” are created and then have them compile a list of ways that we can and are avoided duplicating such a dust bowl in the United States.

**Informational/Functional Texts**

- Texts describing the Great Depression
- Maps
- Newspaper articles from the era
- Environmental science texts that describe how dust bowls are created.