

## Form Follows Function:

The Relationship Between Structure and Content in Three of Karen Hesse's Novels

Louis Sullivan, mentor to Frank Lloyd Wright, once noted that, in architecture, form should follow function; a building should be designed to suit its purpose. When designing a home for a family, for example, it makes sense to create open spaces for gathering and to provide ample storage. These choices encourage family interaction and maintain some semblance of order in the midst and bustle of life. Similarly, a museum that houses large-scale paintings requires a much different setting than one geared toward the display of portraiture; with each, presentation space must be used to meet the demands of the art. Perhaps, more importantly, the resulting ambiance and sense of scale affect the viewer's impressions. Standing in the vast, open corridor of the Louvre and viewing David's larger-than-life portrayal of the coronation of Napoleon feels different from sitting on a warm couch in a small, salon-style room and seeing Rembrandt's intimate self-portrait. To place the one painting in the setting of the other would detract from the power of the piece.

This same premise holds true in literature. Authors make form-related decisions that affect both the structural and thematic integrity of their work. Understanding content may be of the utmost importance in making meaning of a literary text; form, however, should not be ignored. A work without structure is no work at all, as form is driven by content. In fact, an author's choice of form in the creation of a novel may reveal as much or more than the content itself.

Several young adult authors have written works that demonstrate this connection between content and

form. Walter Dean Myers, *Monster*; Ellen Wittlinger, *Hard Love*, and Liz Rosenberg, *17*; for example, have chosen to share, with great success, one of their narratives through a non-narrative form. Karen Hesse, however, has experimented with form in almost every novel she has written; it has helped to define her as an author. She is a risk-taker who recognizes this pattern in her writing, as well as her pleasure in it, as evidenced by her claim, "It seems that the projects I choose demand a different way of telling than the regular prose narrative, but they are very satisfying when you get them right" (Hendershot and Peck 858). Although several of Hesse's novels serve as models of the power that results when form and function collide in literature, three—*Letters from Rifka*, *The Music of Dolphins*, and *Out of the Dust*—represent the unique personal forms in which Hesse has chosen to ground her stories. By employing personal forms—letters, diary, poetry—in these novels, Hesse celebrates introspection and reaches adolescent readers, in particular, who find relevance in such personal exploration given their reflective nature. Hesse recognizes the needs of her audience and selects forms that will best help them find their way—and themselves—in her stories.

### Letters from Rifka

#### The Plot

Believable characterization and well-developed themes make Hesse's novel, *Letters From Rifka* (1992), a welcome contribution to the world of adolescent literature. The critics agree. The novel's acclaim is evidenced by its selection as a *School Library Journal*

Best Book of the Year, *Horn Book* Book of the Year, and recipient of the National Jewish Book Award. As Hesse notes in the novel's foreword, the work is historical and draws largely on the memories of Lucy Avrutin,

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Hesse's great-aunt. In a collection of letters to her Russian cousin, Tovah, Rifka describes her family's migration from Russia to the United States from 1919 to 1920. We follow her on her tumultuous journey, witnessing the inhumane treatment Russian Jews such as Rifka suffer at the hands of their countrymen, the illness that plagues the family members on their trek, the isolation that Rifka experiences when forced by disease to stay behind, and, eventually, the reunion that grants Rifka her dream of freedom. *Letters from Rifka* is a powerful work of historical fiction. It is unique in form without being inaccessible, and emotional without being melodramatic. The characterization is complex, and the themes are cogent and richly realized. Lucy Avrutin lived a life far removed from that of many

readers, but Hesse has succeeded in conveying her story in a way that is comprehensible, although amazing to imagine.

### **Correspondence (and Hope) through Letters**

In *Letters from Rifka*, Hesse adopts the use of letters as the structural means through which to tell her story. Rifka writes these letters to her sixteen-year-old cousin, Tovah, who remains in Berdichev. The epistolary form allows Rifka to reflect on "memories of what she has left behind, including the fierce racist

persecution" she and her family face (Rochman, 1931). Because she leaves Russia with only a few possessions, Rifka records her correspondence in the margins of a collection of poetry by Alexander Pushkin. As a result, the letters are not sent as they are completed; Rifka, instead, hopes to be reunited with her cousin, at which point she plans to share her experiences.

Due to Rifka's resulting isolation, the letter form is completely appropriate. Writing letters helps Rifka maintain a sense of connection with her family. Her written "conversations" with Tovah provide something familiar amidst her new surroundings. When she learns, for example, that she will be detained at Ellis Island, she writes, "Dear Tovah, I don't know how to tell about what has happened. I feel numb and I can't believe. I thought if I could tell you, maybe it would make some sense, maybe it would help" (92). Writing letters also helps her to cope by giving her some sense of power over her condition. Although she is physically unable to leave Ellis Island, for instance, the details she chooses to provide Tovah about her experiences there are determined by her alone. Her notes provide a means through which she can shape her experience. Finally, writing letters gives her hope. As a form of communication, the use of letters implies an intended audience. This, in turn, suggests that the letters will someday be read and responded to. Rifka believes that eventually what she has to say will be seen by her cousin. This dream of success inspires her to persevere.

### **The Music of Dolphins**

#### **The Plot**

*The Music of Dolphins* (1996) revolves around Mila, a young girl who is raised by dolphins from the time she is four years of age when she alone survives a plane crash near the Florida coast. Still a teenager, Mila is found and "rescued" by the Coast Guard and placed in the hands of Doctor Beck, a research scientist interested in language development in "wild" children such as Mila. Although Mila is a willing participant and thrives at first, she yearns for her ocean home and marine family, eventually accepting her inability to live in human society. In the end, she is returned to her home in the sea but is forever changed by her experience on land. A *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year, *School Library Journal*

Best Book of the Year, ALA Best Book for Young Adults, and *Book Links* Best Book of the Year, *The Music of Dolphins* has earned well-deserved respect as a unique and engaging story sure to conjure questions with no easy answers. *The Music of Dolphins* is memorable primarily due to the accuracy of Mila's observations about the human condition and our subsequent wonderings about what it means to be members of this race. The story is unusual in its construction but not so much that we cannot relate to the characters and their dreams and dilemmas.

### Reflection (and Change) Through Diary Entries

Hesse innovatively employs the diary form in *The Music of Dolphins*. Although the novel appears "deceptively easy in format," it is "complex and demanding" (McClelland 120). Selecting this form, however, resulted only after a struggle. Hesse tells us,

It was tricky to pull off because I tend to write in the first person, and I had a child who was pre-lingual. It was the toughest challenge because if you're telling the story through a first-person narration, and the person telling the story has no language with which to tell the story, how, in fact, do you tell the story? (Bryant, 39)

Hesse solved her dilemma by first recording Mila's thoughts in italics. She begins the story in Mila's own "perfectly sustained voice: the clear and simple, but profound and poetic language of a 'foreigner' with a keen mind and resonant spirit but limited vocabulary" (McClelland 120).

As Mila begins to acquire human language, however, she is asked by the scientists to keep a diary. This diary form records not only Mila's impressions but her changing developmental level as well. Hesse achieves this through a creative use of font size and language structure. When Mila begins to record her words, the letters run in large font across the page, and her sentences are short and simple. Her early entries appear as such:

The helper is Sandy. Sandy says, I have a present for you, Mila. Sandy says, This present is to eat. This present is good fish. Do you want to eat this good fish, Mila?

I say, No. The fish is not good. The fish is dead.

Sandy is not happy. I like Sandy happy. (9)

As Mila's ability develops, however, the letters themselves begin to shrink in size, while her strings of words lengthen. Her word choice reveals a more advanced vocabulary, and her depth of explanation suggests increasing proficiency with the language. She writes,

Everyone is sleeping. I stand at the window. The light of the moon touches the river. I put my ear to the cold glass and I listen to the music of the water.

I am alone.

I am alone like the baby in the lullaby with the birds and the butterflies around him.

The wind makes the trees to sing. The wind makes the river to sing.

I sing too. I sing a gray song. A little, little Mila song. Not big, not many voices. Only one voice. A song of alone. (67)

With her regression, this process is reversed, so that by the end of the novel, we see once again simple words and large font. Visually, Mila's progress and decline are evident.

What is particularly interesting about the use of the diary here deals with the issue of audience. Typically, the diary is a place wherein we record our deepest, most personal feelings, knowing that only our eyes will read them. In this case, however, Mila's words do not remain hidden from view. Because the doctors treat her as a research subject, a powerless pawn in the quest for scientific knowledge, she loses all privacy. Her very self—physically, emotionally, and mentally—is in the hands of the authorities who control her.

## Out of the Dust

### The Plot

One of Hesse's best known novels, *Out of the Dust* (1997) has been well received. Winner of the Newbery Medal and Scott O'Dell Award and recognized as an ALA Notable Children's Book, ALA Best Book for Young Adults, *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year, and *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year, the novel is often touted as her signature work. In it, Hesse tells the story of fourteen-year-old Billie Jo, who lives with her mother and father in the heart of the Oklahoma Dust Bowl during the 1930s. When her mother dies in a tragic accident, Billie Jo is injured and subsequently unable to continue playing the piano, her life's passion. Over the course of the novel, Billie Jo must come to terms with her guilt over her involvement in the accident, her strained relationship

with her father, and her own sense of loss due to her disfigurement, all the while living in a natural world that is destructive and unforgiving. Written in free verse poetry, the novel is unique in form but universal in appeal. Although the novel is particularly situated in terms of plot and setting, Hesse captures and presents a tale that relates to the human condition in general. Not all readers experience death and dust in the world they inhabit, but they can relate to the larger issues of family, freedom, and, ultimately, forgiveness.

### Introspection (and Insight) Through Poems

Hesse has received great praise for her unique use of form in *Out of the Dust*. Here, the story is told through the first person, free verse reflections of Billie Jo. Hesse reveals her rationale for this form:

I never attempted to write this book any other way than in free verse. The frugality of the life, the hypnotically hard work of farming, the grimness of conditions during the dust bowl demanded an economy of words. Daddy and Ma and Billie Jo's rawboned life translated into poetry. (Hesse, "Newbery Medal Acceptance" 426)

Despite the unusual form, the "language, imagery, and rhythms are so immediate that after only a few pages it will seem natural to have the story related in verse" (Schadle, 217). Although "she creates no flowery description of this hard-bitten place," Hesse's words are "artistic in their starkness," almost as we would expect in a "painting or photograph" (Blasingame 12-13). Hesse's editor agrees, noting,

A profound and visceral sense of place is one of the qualities that is most memorable about Karen Hesse's writing . . . . I do remember reading *Out of the Dust* for the first time. And I know where I was. I may have appeared to be sitting at my desk at Scholastic Press, turning the pages of a typewritten manuscript, tuning out the office noise. But I was in Oklahoma in 1934. I was tasting the grit in my mouth. I was burying the dead. I was hopping a train and running away (to Hollywood, in that first draft!), out of the dust with Billie Jo. (Bowen, 432)

This stark form "enables Hesse to cut quickly to the heart of Billie Jo's life and personality" (Blasingame 3) and allows the reader to feel "the intensity of Billie Jo's life" (Stover 97). When, for example, she feels she can no longer continue to exist amidst the memories of sadness, Billie Jo claims,

I am so filled with bitterness,  
it comes from the dust, it comes  
from the silence of my father, it comes  
from the absence of Ma.

I could've loved her better.  
She could've loved me, too.

But she's rock and dust and wind now,  
she's carved stone,  
she's holding my stone brother. (195)

In these unadorned passages, we see her almost as if she is nude, caught in such stark reality that it is sometimes embarrassing to look. The form distills the experiences "into brief, acutely observed phrases" that reveal a depth of pain that cannot be disguised with meaningless words (Lempke, 330).

### Form, Function, and the Adolescent Audience

Adolescents, in their search for understanding, naturally look within. These young readers are struggling to make sense of themselves and their place in the adult world they will soon enter. They are dealing with issues of identity formation, dependence versus independence, and self-acceptance and validation. Hesse's novels, through their inward-looking forms, both reinforce and extend this process. Readers can access the personal feelings and thoughts of characters willing to record their frustrations, fears, heartbreaks, and joys on the written page. Inner selves are revealed, giving us a glimpse into worlds we could access in no other way. Each of these forms—the letter, the diary, and the poem—embodies a sense of intimacy that provides an immediacy of emotion for the reader. Hindered not by excess or unnecessary ornamentation, they provide an honesty of expression that creates a sense of trust between speaker and reader.

Given this unique insider view, adolescent readers can more easily see others like them struggling through conflicts similar to their own and experience a greater sense of normalcy in the recognition that they are not alone. Despite the differing experiences of Rifka, Mila, and Billie Jo, each protagonist is trying to determine where she fits in—am I American or foreigner, am I human or dolphin, am I daughter or outcast? When Rifka writes about her fear of being

alone and Mila records her confusions and frustrations at being human and Billie Jo expresses the heartbreak she feels as a result of her distanced relationship with her father, each girl presents a truth regarding the adolescent condition in the most candid of forms. Witnessing literary characters, especially those similar to themselves in age, successfully (but not without struggle) navigate this coming of age journey can encourage younger readers to persevere in the search for self. Authors, like Karen Hesse, who allow their characters to tell engaging, personal stories that readers find relevant to their own lives can inspire, or in the very least, encourage readers to realize, "It's OK to be me."

As young readers wonder about the kinds of people they are and will become, they can also safely imagine themselves into other worlds, peering into the revealed and revealing lives of the girls they meet on the page. Here they can witness, examine, and, ideally, empathize with characters that can provide alternatives not provided in their everyday lives. Through reading Rifka's portrayal of her experiences, young women in traditional homes may come to value her spunk, audacity, and desire to be an educated, free human being. Mila may inspire young readers to question what they have come to take for granted as members of the human community. Are we indeed as wise and important as we sometimes think? As Billie Jo faces her physical deformity and resulting dashed dreams, those who have never struggled with such seeming limitations may develop a greater respect for those who have. Entering into the minds of each character, as these personal forms allow, enables readers to experience the world in a new way, a way that may encourage alternative thinking and engender compassion and concern.

### **In the End, the Medium Matters**

What impresses me most about Hesse's approach to fiction is her willingness to experiment, to explore innovative forms that yield more powerful content. Hesse's novels would not be as effective if written in other forms. The forms (informal and personal) fit the function (helping readers interact meaningfully with texts). How appropriate to use the letter form when describing the experiences of a young girl who hopes for nothing more than to be successfully reunited with

her family, to maintain some semblance of communication, to rekindle the connection she has lost while traveling on her own. Through what means could one more clearly witness the progression and regression of a character than through a personal diary that allows readers to experience this pattern in a way that telling alone could not provide? What better way to capture the bleak landscape and accompanying emotional desolation of the Dust Bowl era than through barebones poetry in which every word carries weight and significance? Beethoven scored the last movement of his Ninth Symphony, "Ode to Joy," on a massive scale in hopes of most effectively capturing his vision of unadulterated, collective human joy. That same, simple melody played by a single trumpet might be beautiful, but the message conveyed and resulting impact on the audience is not the same. In literature, in art, in music, in life, the medium matters.

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